



探偵執事・

DETECTIVE BUTLER・KUJO KOUJIROU

九条公十郎

立花慎之介

TACHIBANA SHINOSUKE

Koushirou Kujou the Detective Butler

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[Novel Updates](#)

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Prologue

“Welcome to our Hakoniwa Detective Agency.”

A man with silver hair and the encompassment of black suits slowly opened his mouth.

“My name is Koushirou Kujou. I am a butler and a detective of this agency. Although there are many different types of detective businesses, we mainly handle these two types of mysteries:”

While speaking, Kujou pointed out his index finger of his right hand.

“The first type is the one our master, Miss Yui Mikami, handles, which includes cases that are related to the supernatural. Should we call them as the so-called occult events? These are the ones which can only be solved by Miss Yui’s second sight. But, I will introduce this case to you later.”

After his voice faded out, Kujou then pointed out his middle finger.

“The second type is the one I handle, which are cases that are atrociously difficult. These cases mainly include murders and esoteric mysteries. The stories I will introduce to everyone are handled by me. These three stories are complicated, while outrageously beautiful. I wish you’ll enjoy them.”

After Kujou’s courteous bow, there appeared an adorable girl.

“Kujou, bring me some assam tea with milk.”

“Yes, Miss Yui. I will prepare strawberry millefeuille as well.”

Immediately after that, noises rushed into the peaceful detective agency.

“Yeah — I heard that!! I want to eat millefeuille, too!!”

“Akira, you are so early today. Was school over?”

The juvenile named Akira seemed to be a high schooler. He sat onto the chair as a matter of course.

“Right, right, it was over ~ Oh, Kujou, I want black tea, too~”

“OK, I understood. Then I will pour the hot water burned by the red-hot hellfire into your mouth immediately!!”

“Oh no! Stupid! Stop! I am truly going to die by this!!”

And then, the curtains of the story of Hakoniwa Detective Agency were raised in jollification.

Chapter 1: Murder at Jouji Girls' School

1

“Hey! You!!”

The moment right after hearing the voice of the girl, the scarlet carpet under his feet crumpled up.

After stumbling for two or three steps, he finally lost his balance.

The tea cup from Wedgwood was wavering in the air with the oval tray that was polished to a mirror shine.

The tragedy happened after several moments emerged in Akira's mind...

“That's why I told you that you aren't able to do it. Go away!”

The man who said that had the tea set which was supposed to fall onto the floor placed in his left hand. On the other side, he kept holding the cake stand in his right hand.

“This butler...is talented.”

Because the extraordinarily gorgeous rescue drama happened right in front of his eyes, Akira sighed with admiration while rolling on the floor.

The butler in black suits glanced at Akira rolling on the floor, but acted like nothing happened. He then stepped over Akira and walked towards the girl.

“Kujou, is he okay?”

The girl mentioned concerned for him.

“Miss Yui, I will clean up the trash later, so please don't worry.”

“Who is trash! You sadistic and horrible butler!!”

“Was that a howl from a masochist? Really... That's because you were trying

to do something that you weren't able to. Understand it."

While speaking, the butler called Kujou was quickly preparing for the afternoon tea.

Koushirou Kujou was the butler who worked at Hakoniwa Detective Agency. He was a tall man with long and silver hair. His age appeared to be around twenty. Even though he was a butler who was perfect for any work, he was sometimes invective towards a specific person.

According to himself, that seemed to be his individuality.

The girl whose eyes were shining while looking at the cakes by her hand was the master, Yui Mikami, of this agency.

She was a petite girl with chestnut brown hair who was very adorable with the black and white gothic lolita outfit on her. According to the general opinion, her age appeared to be close to a high school student's; however, opposite to her appearance, she speaks like she has understood life.

And the guy who replaced the tea set which should be leaking the floor¹ was a current high school student, Akira Satou. He was an ordinary man with nothing special that was worth talking about. The only thing he had that might earn praises from others was probably his superior positive way of thinking.

According to Kujou, "that guy is a masochist who has beyond a positive way of thinking."

1. [leaking the floor – a Japanese phrase used in MMORPG (massively multiplayer online role-playing games) to describe the situation that a character of a player cannot fight anymore. When the character faces down, he looks like he is leaking he floor.]↩

2

Shinjuku District, Tokyo. In the gap of this street crowded by soigne high-rise buildings, there was the Hakoniwa Detective Agency.

The western-styled house with outer walls covered by bricks grabbed the attentions of spectators; trees in the garden covered the appearances of themselves, appearing to refuse any impolite visitors.

Walking into the gigantic double doored entrance, you might have the illusion of coming into Medieval Europe. Surely, the nobles held dinner parties within this kind of house every night. The rabbit dolls with some dirt decorated on the sides of the entrance were adorable.

That was the dining room of such a detective agency.

“I think the stalker incidents have become a serious problem in Japan.”

At this moment which was suitable for afternoon tea, news commenters on the TV started their discussion.

“I can’t imagine him chasing her even after they broke up!”

“People in the world don’t think as positively as you do.”

Kujou has already finished preparing tea, and after he fixed the blanket that Akira fell on , he started being invective.

“ I am sorry about my bird brain¹.”

“Oh, you have self-consciousness. That’s great.”

Although Akira’s fists trembled with anger, he seemed to care more about Yui , and turned his eye to her.

She now cared about nothing that happened in the world, focusing only on fighting with a piece of Napoleon pie that was made with many strawberries.

Akira smiled.

At approximately the same time, the oval tray made of silver fell onto his head.

“Don’t look at Miss Yui with lust, you gross kid! Anyways, you’re thinking the motions of desperately eating desserts are adorable, aren’t you??”

“You... It really hurts... By the way, how can you read my mind!”

Akira held his head and sat onto the sofa with a bitter face.

“Although Kujou works as a butler, he is also a famous detective who supports the Hakoniwa Detective Agency. It is easy for him to read your and other ordinary people’s mind.”

Yui won the mortal fight with a piece of Napoleon pie, and answered while choosing another piece.

“Eh? But I thought Yui is the one who solves all the cases.”

“I only solve the spirit-related occult events. Kujou solves all other cases. He carries out the so-called general detective businesses.”

Yui’s hands stopped choosing cakes.

“I don’t think there are cases that he isn’t able to solve.”

Hearing Yui’s words filled with trust toward Kujou, Akira showed an envious expression with a little bit of admiration. He reseated while sighing lightly.

“By the way, since when have you been able to perceive the spirits by your eyes?”

“Since I was born.”

“Oh~ That sounds great. I want that kind of special powers as well.”

“Do you think being able to perceive the spirits is special? Being unable to perceive them is common sense?”

“... Eh?...”

Akira’s words clogged in front of Kujou’s sudden question.

“... I’ve never thought about it that way... ”

“Hum. Apparently, you didn’t recognize a question as a question.”

“Oh, no... That’s right... By the way, since there are more people being unable to perceive the spirits in the world, doesn’t it mean that being unable to perceive them is natural? According to common sense, isn’t it natural being

unable to perceive them?”

Using Earl Grey to slightly moisten his lips, Kujou slowly opened his mouth.

“Common sense? What do you mean by common sense?”

“What? Common sense is common sense, isn’t it?”

“... Common sense... What’s common sense is what the majority believes as natural when they view matters objectively. It includes values, knowledge, evaluation criteria, and so on. According to the majority rule, when more people believe something as natural, it’ll become common sense. So far, do you understand?”

“O... Oh...”

“Then, the foundation named common sense is actually unstable. What if common sense is a group of assumptions?”

“What? What do you mean?”

Kujou began his explanation step-by-step, just like an elementary teacher.

“I’ll give you a simple example. There are traffic lights at the crosswalks, right? Which color represents stop?”

“Isn’t it red?”

“Right. It’s red. Then which one represents go?”

“It’s green. Kujou, aren’t you fooling me?”

“No, that’s enough.”

Quickly, Kujou squinted his eyes.

“Then, what if they’re mistaken?”

“... What!?... What are you saying? No matter who you ask in the world, everyone will answer that red is stop and green is go. Isn’t that common sense!?”

“You have a red-letter brain. You are captivated by common sense too much. Listen to me... In fact, when humans look, they appear to look with eyes but they don’t. The electrical signals recognized by eyes are transported to the

brain via optic nerves. Then at a place within the brain named visual cortex, the signals are projected as images. By doing so, humans are able to look. In a nutshell, humans don't look with eyes; instead, they recognize things with their brains."

"... Y... Yup..."

Unable to understand Kujou's explanation, Akira nodded his head with confusion.

Noticing the turmoil within Akira's brain, Kujou sighed once.

"Return to our topic. You said red was stop and green was go. That's the outcome of recognizing the colors by brain."

Kujou stopped for one breath².

"Then does everyone in this world recognize the same red and the same green?"

"... What's that... Are you saying that people view red as something besides red? Is that possible? Red is red, right?"

Discovering Akira's turmoil, Yui hinted at the answer.

"That's what's called color-blindness."

Kujou nodded with satisfaction.

"Yes, Miss Yui, just as you said."

Akira showed an enlightened expression while making a "Oh yes!" sound after he finally understood.

"I say it in advance: color-blindness is not an illness but a way to represent that condition. Within all Japanese people, it is said that there is one color-blind out of every twenty or thirty males and one out of every five hundred females. In a word, the color you think is red is a slightly different red in those people's opinions."

"Eh? But that's because the color-blinds are mistaken..."

"Who decided so?"

Kujou catechized in no time.

“The process of recognizing colors is entrusted to everyone’s brain. Then the majority of those personal sensations becomes common sense unreasonably. But... What if...”

“The brains of the majority are mistaken?”

After the tone of his voice settled down for a while, he influenced the atmosphere around him.

“The minority said the red traffic light was yellow while looking at it. How can you say they were actually mistaken? If the color believed to be red by the majority was actually yellow, believing by the minority, what the majority with color-blindness believed would become the common sense. Majority and minority. Can you prove which recognition between these two is correct?”

The silent time passed.

After a while, Yui gave a helping hand to Akira again.

“Since the recognition of colors is entrusted to everyone’s brain, under the condition of being unable to recognize the true color of red, it is unprovable in fact. I can probably say both the majority and the minority are correct. But that will bring inconvenience to this world, thus, everything is based on the majority.”

“Wonderful, Miss Yui. That’s very perceptive of you.”

While smiling, Kujou poured black tea into Yui’s tea cup.

“W, wait. Since matters are decided through the majority rule, is it okay for the common sense in this world to be so iffy?”

“It’s not something about okay or not. This is the reality”

“Eh, no. Umm... I feel like I have something in my mind, but... I don’t think I can express it well enough...”

Akira soliloquized with his two arms crossed and head tilted.

“Then, let’s make it as a foundation and return to the root of our discussion.

You said that being able to perceive the spirits was special and not ordinary. How can you perceive the spirits?”

“Even if you ask me, I can’t perceive them... Wait? I got it !! Yui, how can you perceive the spirits with your eyes?”

“By normally using my eyes to perceive them.”

While blissfully confirming the elasticity of blueberry bavarois with a fork, fidgety Yui answered.

“... By using eyes to perceive the spirits...”

Akira muttered, finally understanding the purpose of Kujou’s prolix prelude. He clapped his hands once with the sound of “Bon.”

“Oh! The visual cortex is the part that perceive spirits!!”

“You finally understand it, dumb-ass boy.”

Kujou showed the most gorgeous smile of the day.

“The ability to view is completely determined by the optic cortex. Spirits and color are all the same. It is possible for the majority to be mistaken, and the minority called psychics to be correct. It may be better if people recognize the possibility that psychics are ordinary. Oh, I need to tell you that the common sense is not completely incorrect; however, if you only focus on common sense, you may lose the basic of matters.”

Kujou closed the discussion like that, and finished the black tea as if he was moistening his throat.

While Akira and Kujou were seriously discussing about the uncommon topic, Yui was trying to attack the montblanc made of astringent skinned chestnut silently.

“Excuse me.”

What marked a period to this kind of average day of the detective agency was the bell at the entrance and the voice that seemed to belong to a middle-aged male.

1. [bird brain – a Japanese phrase which describes a person with a head like a sieve.]↵
2. [stop for one breath – a Japanese synonym for trying to calm down.]↵

3

He was really tall, with moderately tousled hair and a slender facial feature. The indistinct dark circles beneath his eyes probably due to anxiety.

His age was around 40. This attractive middle-aged man who naturally wore a navy blue suit without a single crease introduced himself as Kentarou Nishino.

The clock within the reception office pointed to fifteen o'clock. Kujou sat onto the sofa and immediately went straight into the topic.

"As you have said over the phone, you want us to find out the offender who murdered your daughter, Azusa Nishino, this time, correct? "

The word "murder" took Akira's breath away.

"... Yes... "

"Then please tell me what you know about the case."

Nishino opened his mouth with his face slightly facing down ponderously.

"I work as the principal of Private Jouji Girl's High School. Azusa was a student from there."

"My daughter was a member of the Track Club, and she jogged around the neighborhood for about an hour every night. ... However, that night, Azusa did not come back even after two hours... I was worried, so I walked around to find her. I went from major roads to minor streets. Although there weren't many people, I asked them if they have seen a girl looked like a high school student. ... But my daughter wasn't anywhere.... "

At that moment, words such as kidnapping and abduction came to Nishino's

mind.

“And then my wife called me. I thought my daughter was home, so my heart relieved.”

The sorrow on Nishino’s face deepened when he stopped for one breath.

“... But when I answered the phone...The reality was a completely different story... ‘She was stabbed and now she’s in the hospital! We have to go there now!!’ I can never forget my wife’s sorrowful voice even now.”

Nishino pressed onto his lacrimal caruncles¹ and sniffled.

“When I rushed into the hospital, the doctors and policies were waiting for us... And... Azusa’s face was covered by a white cloth. I shook her and yelled ‘Azusa! Azusa!’ many and many times. When I touched her glamorous face, it was still warm — I could feel her warmth... But the doctor... He said... ‘I am sorry for your daughter...’”

The feeling of a father whose daughter was plundered from him was so sorrowful that it affected the atmosphere even as he attempted to restrain it.

“I heard from the police that a pedestrian saw Azusa when Azusa was about to fall down in a park within the neighborhood in Numabukuro². It is said that the place around was a sea of blood that time. The cause of death was the hemorrhagic shock due to cutleries. The wound probably extended through the left side of her waist to her heart. Plus, the police said the ferociousness of the offender could be seen because the wound was sideways.”

Nishino used his handkerchief to wipe his endless tears when he talked about it.

“Do you have any threads or clues regarding the offender?”

“The police said they couldn’t find a single weapon, and my daughter was killed around twenty-two and twenty-three o’clock when there weren’t many pedestrians or witnesses. And both my wife and I think Azusa was modest, so we don’t think she could possibly incur the wrath of anyone... However... One time... Azusa said she was possibly tailed after by a strange man. I don’t know if that might be the reason...”

Kujou narrowed his eyes for a moment.

“Thank you very much. I understand the situation. Since it has been two weeks the case happened, is there any progress on the searching?”

“... No... I haven't heard anything from the police after that.”

Nishino lifted up his downcast face.

“Please... I can not let her go like this. Please accept my request...”

Nishino's eyes staring at Yui and Kujou pleadingly, scarlet and wet.

“Miss Yui, what do you think about it?”

Yui had not spoken anything but only listened to them until now. She slowly opened her mouth.

“... From earlier, I... can see a girl with black hair in a short bob hairstyle. Her height is petite. The mole near the left side of her mouth is impressive.”

Nishino was so surprised that his eyes popped out.

“That wasn't a rumor... You can... really....”

“Of course. So, is this girl Azusa? She is standing behind you. Standing, but... ”

“What happened, Miss Yui?”

“She frequently murmures ‘... Why... Why... I don't understand... Who...’ This represents... probably Azusa herself doesn't know the reasons of suddenly being attacked. Even she becomes a phantom now, she is still pretty confused. I thought we could obtain useful information regarding the offender from Azusa... Then... Plus... Perhaps, this case is not so simple.”

“Why...”

After perceiving the spirit, Yui's facial expression was clouded. Nishino was in a choked voice. The atmosphere of that place became so heavy that no one moved his body.

“... However..No matter what happened, as long as now we know what our clients and spirits want, I have the duty to respond to it. ”

“Then, Miss Yui...”

Yui spoke with dignity.

“This case, Hakoniwa Detective Agency will receive. ”

“Yes, my lady.”

Kujou hung his head, and relieved Nishino held Yui’s hands. At this point, the atmosphere in the reception room became more relaxed.

“Yui, Kujou, both of you are so awesome! You are just like real detectives!!”

After finished talking about the investigation plan from now on, Akira turned his eyes filled with curiosity to Kujou after Kujou saw Nishino off at the entrance and came back.

“We are real detectives. You fool.”

“Kujou was so calm and asked about the situation, and Yui was perceiving spirits and found Azusa. You were very cool! And when Mr. Nishino vented his grievances with tears, I was also kind of feeling to cry. Like, I want to help too! I was thinking about this.”

“This is not a game for a kid. Go back home, idiot.”

“I will definitely be helpful in some ways!”

“Didn’t you hear me? You’re helpless!”

“Eh, no... But...”

“Get crushed quickly!”

“E, even though, you don’t have to...”

“You are annoying, be bald!”

“Wait you! There’s nothing to do with being bald!! ”

“Kujou, don’t say that. Aren’t we going to investigate a high school? I’m sure that Akira will be helpful. ”

Yui spoke on Akira’s behalf softly.

“But, Miss Yui...”

Yui kept speaking as she didn't hear Kujou's advice.

"Azusa was a student from Jouji High School, so I think we can start investigating the school first. Aren't you a high school student? As a student, you have the possibility to find out the detailed information from other students. Let's start searching about Azusa mainly focus on students."

"OK! I got it!!"

With the momentum that his aspiration is accepted, Akira showed a thumb-up.

Although Kujou sighed and overlooked them, he reluctantly started explaining the investigation plan from now on because this was his master's decision.

"Mr. Nishino is the principal of Jouji High School. There won't be any problems with sneaking into the school. I will sneak in as a substitute, you will be a student teacher, and Miss Yui will be a transfer student to investigate inside the school."

"Yes! I got it !"

"Speaking of this, Akira, is your school okay with this?"

Yui asked an obvious question.

"Yes, that's fine. There will be a test tomorrow, so I will be dismissed before noon. I can meet you as soon as noon."

"Is that okay? That doesn't affect studying for your test?"

"I am totally comfortable♪ To me, that test will be super easy!!"

Immediately, their voices overlapped.

"What, so basically, you want to leave me behind?"

And then, obviously, Akira had the second time of floor leaking³ today.

1. [Press onto one's lacrimal caruncles – a Japanese phrase meaning trying to restrain the tears from coming out of the lacrimal caruncles.]↵

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he floor.]↩

5

Kuramae, Taitou District¹. The place crowded by houses from the past was the so-called old town. A famous tourist place, Seisou Temple, was nearby, and the Tokyo Sky Tree could be viewed from there as well.

This old town had already been built for over twenty years, and now Tamura is living in a crappy apartment.

After the bell rung for a few seconds, the old wooden door was slowly opened with squeaky sounds.

The facial features of the man who murmured “What do you want?” were... Unkempt hair tousled due to bad sleeping positions. A stubbly beard extended as lines around his mouth and on his chin. He probably had an unbalanced diet; he was skinny overall, but his stomach protruded from his body. You couldn’t tell he was twenty-one with a single glance.

The man in a creased jersey was Yukitoshi Tamura.

He was the suspect for murdering Azusa Nishino.

Kujou started the conversation with a smile.

“We are the police. We came to ask you some questions regarding the case of Azusa Nishino. Can we have your cooperation?”

He seemed like has already been questioned for several times. He did not hide his disconcerted face.

Kujou continued interrogating.

“Where did you meet Azusa Nishino?”

“By chance, I saw her at a convenience store in Akiba² when she was working as a cash register..”

“Then you accosted her?”

“I didn’t accost her. Accosting a woman I meet for the first time is a little... I don’t even know what to talk about.”

“I see. This is why you gave her letters?”

“... Police, do you believe in falling in love at first sight? When I first met Azusa... I was convinced of its existence.”

“However, after you have handed her the letters, you were refused by Azusa euphemistically, right?”

“My letters were received. Receiving my letters was her reply, right? She continued receiving my love. That’s why I wrote letters and handed them to her everyday from that point on.”

The man who did not read the refuse literally but believed in the action of receiving the letters written with his love instead made them felt a little bit cold.

“I once wrote that ‘I like you. Please be my girlfriend. If you like me as well, please receive my letter tomorrow.’”

Recalling what the female students had said, Akira opened his eyes.

... Although she received the letters, she stopped reading them from the middle...

This was the crucial moment when misunderstandings started to exist.

Kujou and Yui realized it as well, and their faces became clouded.

“So after that, she continued receiving your letters. Is that’s true?”

“Right. I had never thought that resonance between two people was that exhilarating.”

Tamura hadn’t shown any changes in facial expressions until now, but he smiled.

“I see, I see. Azusa probably cherished the letters filled with your love.”

Pretending to agree with Tamura’s thoughts with words, Kujou’s eyes looked through Tamura’s innermost heart.

As Kujou had expected, Tamura's expressions became incensed immediately.

"... But..."

"What? 'But.' What are you talking about?"

"... But... She... Azusa... She tore up all the letters she had received from me and all of my love right in front of my eyes! One by one!! And she said! 'Stop bothering me! You're gross so don't ever come again!!'"

Tamura knocked on the door with all his strength and crazy wrath.

"....So....What was that... Why did she receive my letters... What was the resonance between us two... Who was gross... Why was she treating my love like this.... Wasn't her heart the grossest thing... Don't kid with me.... Why do I have to be heart-broken.... This doesn't make any sense.... The one who should be heart-broken... The one who should be heart-broken is Azusa!! Let her disappear from this world!! "

The murderous intent exuded from the inside of his inordinate breathing.

"What you have just said are confirming your murderous intent."

With a faint smile, Tamura took in a huge breath. Kujou turned his unfocused and vacuous eyes to him.

"Everyone has wanted to kill somebody at one point."

"I see, that's true. So let's go back to our conversation. Where were you 22 o'clock at the day of the murder ? "

"... At a game center in Akiba."

"Do you often go to game centers?"

"Eh... Sometimes..."

"Even a social withdrawal felt it's not enough to stay at home to play game?"

"I, I just wanted to change my mood ! "

"Oh, I see. Do you have any... friends? Or any witnesses?"

"That's impossible. If... If... If you don't believe me, just go check the security camera at the game center."

“Yeah, you’re right.”

Kujou’s heels were ready to leave, but he recalled something and went back to Tamura.

“Mr. Tamura... Have you ever been to the Private Jouji Girl’s High School? ”

Tamura opened his eyes widely.

“Thank you very much. I appreciate your cooperation.”

Kujou smiled affably.

After leaving Tamura’s house, the three went to Akihabara on their way and started to investigate the alibi provided by him.

Because there were instructions came from the police, videos from the day of Azusa being murdered were kept. Just by looking at them, Tamura was at that single game center the whole day. Although he had left for several times, the longest one was only for twenty minutes. It would be fair to think that he went to restroom or restaurant. At least only a single way from Shinjuku to the crime scene in Numabukuro takes twenty minutes for electric train.

Furthermore, during the time of Azusa being murdered, from twenty-two o’clock to twenty-three o’clock, the figure of Tamura immersed in games stayed in the videos.

Also, according to the employees, they said that they saw a rarely seen customer wearing the same jersey and staying at the game center for a whole day three days in a row..

The videos from the security camera and the testimony provided by the employees.

Yukitoshi Tamura’s alibi was flawless.

The sky became darker, and in the dining room of Hakoniwa Detective Agency, the three including Akira were perplexed.

“Although it was unnatural that he stayed at the game center for a long time

even though he rarely went; however, as a matter of fact, it was impossible for him to kill Azusa.”

“Right, what Miss Yui has just said. After that, I contacted Mr. G, and he asked, ‘Right?’ Then we ended the conversation.”

“I see. So the police had the same information as what we have obtained and are stuck now...”

“Since he still had the stalking case, he will not be acquitted.... Something like that....”

“Why... I thought the offender was surely him... ”

“Although he has alibi, we cannot remove Tamura from the suspect list easily. We have to closely examine his alibi and find possibilities besides this from now on.”

The first flush of darjeeling tea had already become cold.

Opposite to the brilliant yellowish water, the three were surrounded by a dark and heavy atmosphere.

After that, no one had opened his mouth that day.

The investigation had almost gone back to the starting point. Three days after Hakoniwa Detective Agency and the police were deadlocked,

... That case had happened...

1. [Taitou District – a special ward located in Tokyo, Japan. It is also known as Taito City.][↩](#)
2. [Akiba – the shortening of Akihabara, a district in the Chiyoda ward of Tokyo, Japan.][↩](#)

6

“The man who was investigated by the police as the suspect of the case of a female high school student being murdered was discovered lying in a park along the Sumida River^{[1](#)} with blood bleeding from his head. His death was confirmed later. The

deceased was Yukitoshi Tamura, with an age of twenty-one. The scene contained a large amount of liquor bottles, so the police stated that it was possibly an accident. They're trying to continue the investigation... ”

All the afternoon variety shows were discussing about this topic. Akira murmured with astonishment after watching the news at the detective agency.

“Hey, Kujou... So a case was solved... Right?”

No reply.

Akira turned his head back, and saw Kujou glaring at the TV screen with a deeper frown in between his brows than usual.

“... Inconceivable...”

“What? What are you talking about?”

“Tamura had the motive to murder Azusa, but he had alibi at the same time. However... I can't help thinking that his alibi was too perfect.”

“Perfect?”

“Yeah. Although persistently visiting a game center only before and after the case had happened works as an alibi, it's inexplicable as an action.”

“Umm~ But even if we assume Tamura as the offender, he didn't have time to murder Azusa, right?”

Kujou sighed once and started to contemplate after Akira asked the rhetorical question. But, he realized something in the next moment and clapped his hands.

All the attention focused on Kujou.

“The very last thing I did was asking Tamura if he had been into Private Jouji Girl's High School. It contain the meaning of ‘have you invaded the school illegally in order to meet Azusa directly?’ Although I was actually trying to trick him into revealing the truth... His reaction seemed like nothing like that had happened.”

“Umm... I see... Then both Tamura's death and his alibi are convincing.”

Placing the tea cup down, Yui became determined.

“Then let’s investigate the school again.”

“Yes, my lady.”

Kujou was determined as well, and bowed down his head.

“Wwwwait a moment! No, no, no, no, it’s impossible for me to understand your conversation!! What are you guys talking about!! There’s a limit to jumping topics!!”

Distraught, Akira yelled with nonsense as if it was the end of the world. However, Kujou was extremely calm.

“What? You’re the one who understand the most.”

“Eh!? Wwwwhat do you mean?”

Kujou let out a long sigh.

“When we first went to Jouji School, there was guy who bumped into you at the front gate, right? That was Tamura.”

“... What? Wwwwwwwwhat!?”

Akira yelled with even a louder voice.

“The one with a hoodie? The one who murmured ‘That rascal?’ ... But... But... Why was Tamura in the school?”

“You really make my head hurt. You’re not suitable to be a detective. Quit being a human,”

“There’s no relationship between a detective and a human!!”

“Listen to me. Tamura was meeting with someone in the school at that time, so I wondered if a quarrel had just happened. Then when he spoke of irritation unconsciously, he bumped into you. Tamura’s illegal invasion of the school and the murder suspect of Azusa, plus the excessively unnatural alibi. Consider these points as a whole, and the answer will come out.”

“Then... I’m thinking... ”

He had probably somehow realized something. Akira stopped for a breath.

“So the people regarding this series of cases are most likely within Private

Jouji Girl's High School.”

1. Sumida River – located in Tokyo, Japan. [↩](#)

7

Akira went to Jouji High School. He hadn't been there for several days.

When the female students saw the student teacher, they went to talk to him immediately; however, there wasn't anything that could be a clue for this case.

“What are your hobbies?” “Do you like desserts?” “Let's have lunch together!” “Do you have a girlfriend?” “You kind of look like a dog.”

“The last one was unnecessary!!” Akira was about to yell, but he had no energy left because of the storm of questioning. He decided to go to the rooftop because he also wanted to change his mood.

Since there were railings on the rooftop of the school, it was always open to the students.

Akira went upstairs and through the wide open door. The weather was nice, and his sight was whited out because of the sunshine.

After a few seconds, he saw the blue sky and a girl. She looked like she was reading a book about something.

“What are you reading?”

Leaning on the fence, she raise her head.

“U~h... Are you Mr. Satou?”

“Yeah, that's right.”

“This is an English novel.”

“Ah... My weakest subject!”

The girl grinned after hearing this and introduced herself as Kyouko Akihara.

“Kyouko, do you like English?”

“Yes!! I want to be a translator and create subtitles for foreign movies. ”

Her light brown hair was tied in a ponytail and she smiled. She was an adorable girl with impressive and noticeable canines.

“Aren’t English novels more complicated than what you learn at school? You can read that?”

“It was extremely complicated at first, but I started to understand them during the process of looking up words by myself.”

While saying this, an English-Japanese dictionary was placed beside her. Her steady endeavor would probably bear fruit.

“Then, aren’t English classes boring?”

“No, that never happens. Studying grammar and some basic things are very useful... But...”

Different then the light tone until now, she turned slightly clouded and continued the conversation.

“Since we currently have a Japanese teacher, I’m not satisfied.”

“Oh? What does that mean?”

“The teacher pronounces words in a Japanese way. Should I say that it’s not authentic?”

“Eh? So the teacher before was authentic, which means the teacher was a foreigner!?”

“That’s right. He’s a man named Robert Carter and was born in America.”

“Wow, an American teacher. Then, of course, comparing this teacher to Mr.Carter... ”

Akira stopped when he spoke to that.

Within the abrupt silence, Kyouko looked into Akira’s face, questioning.

“Mr. Sadou?”

“Kyouko. Was Mr. Carter the teacher who was transferred to Kumamoto¹?”

“Ehh, yes. You’ve heard about it.”

“... Oh, no... I forgot about him completely...”

Akira recalled the name Carter from the investigation on the first day.

Kujou said the man who bumped into Akira at the front gate was Tamura Yukitoshi. He’s the one who murmured ‘That rascal.’

The person he was meeting with until that.

“Then... That man was... ”

Hearing Akira’s whisper, Kyouko arched her neck.

“Kyouko, please tell me whatever you know. What do you know about Mr. Carter? Why was he transferred suddenly?”

“I don’t really know the reason why he was transferred, but I remember it was actually suddenly. He was a thoughtful, tender, and intelligent teacher. His language skills were also impressive. He said he knew English, Japanese, French, and German. I think... He’s worked here since two or three years ago. His lessons were easy to understand and he answered my questions politely when I went to ask him during the break. He was not only tall but also handsome... To my knowledge, I don’t think I’ve heard any negative rumors about him from either students or teachers...”

“I see.”

“And... He never mix official business with... Private affairs... He was a wonderful teacher.”

The last sentence Kyouko had said revealed some sorrow..

But, Akira would never notice that slight change and kept talking with optimism.

“Back to our conversation. Kyouko, you really look deeply into people.”

“I am the moral monitor, so normally I’ll hear or see some things..”

Kyouko returned joyful, like the sadness had been blown away.

“You’re the moral monitor!? I’m scared!”

“Ha, ha, ha, I am very serious ~ No one can violate the school rules as long as my eyes are still black²!”

“Oh no~ Kyouko is very serious, so I feel bad for everyone else~”

“What do you mean by you feel bad, stop!”

Kyouko became angry very adorably, and she started to leave, “I’m going to return to the classroom..”

Akira chased after her from behind quickly.

“Is it easy for outsiders to sneak into the school?”

“Outsiders? Umm~ I don’t know about that. But there are security guards outside, so I don’t think people can come in easily.”

“Then, are there many authorized people entering and exiting the school? Such as student teachers like me and substitute teachers.”

“Sometimes, I think. Probably once for every half year. Oh, but the merchants are often seen.”

“Merchants?”

“Right. They sometimes carry goods to the school’s store and sometimes deliver textbooks to the Chemistry stockroom. They are people wearing blue hoodies.”

“... Blue hoodies...”

Because she cared that Akira stopped unexpectedly, Kyouko turn back and stopped.

“... It can’t be wrong... Carter was the one who met with Tamura when Tamura wore that merchants’ hoodie... Which indicates that Carter prepared the hoodies... But, then, what did they talk about when they met at school...”

Mumbling, Akira organized his thoughts in a low volume. Hearing his voice, Kyouko became astonished.

“Mr.Carter was there!?”

Kyouko asked while shaking Akira's hand strongly.

"Eh? Oh, no. I just thought that perhaps he was there."

Akira was surprised a little and he smiled bitterly, Kyouko showed her sad face.

"Kyouko, you really yearn to meet Mr. Carter that much?"

"Eh... No... That was... Because his transfer was so sudden that I didn't get to say goodbye to him... It's not like... I like him or something like that..."

Hearing that, Akira smiled and said,

"Kyouko? I've never asked you, 'Who do you like?' Right?"

Realizing that she jumped to the conclusion too hastily, Kyouko became flushed all the way to her ears and looked down hesitantly.

When they were ready to start walking again, there came a familiar voice from the stairs.

"Oh, is it Mr. Akira and Kyouko?"

When they looked, they saw Mari Kitamikado, the president of the student council.

Kyouko hid her face back.

"What's going on, Kitamikado?"

She answered Akira's question with her gentle Mari smile.

"Since I heard talking voices from the rooftop, I wanted to remind them that the break was about to end."

"Teacher, I am going to be late to class, so I'll leave right now."

Then Kyouko bowed to Akira and went downstairs without so much as a glance at Mari.

After watching Kyouko's actions, Mari turned around.

"What did you two talk about?"

"Like something about herself and something about Mr. Carter."

“Mr. Carter... He was the English teacher who was transferred several days ago, right?”

“Ah, yes, yes. Speaking of which, Kitamikado, do you know why Mr. Carter was transferred?”

“No, I don’t know that many details.”

“Kyouko was the same, sure that no one knows the reason~”

Affected by Akira laughing out “Ahaha,” Mari smiled as well.

“Oh! I want to ask something else. Was Mr.Carter very familiar with the merchants?”

“About the merchants... They are the people who carry the goods into the school, right? No, I don’t know it that many details, since I hadn’t talked with Mr. Carter that much.”

She answer regrettably and knitted her eyebrows.

“I see. Sorry, I asked a weird question.”

“No, that’s fine.”

She smiled sweetly.

They went downstairs until they reached 12th grade classrooms, Akira said goodbye to Mari, and slowly went downstairs.

“Did Kyouko talk about anything else?”

Unexpectedly, a question came from behind.

When Akira turned back, smiling Mari reflect in his eyes.

“No, nothing besides that... ”

... A moment of silence...

Her shining black hair waved intensely in the wind.

“I see. Then, I still have my next class period, so I’m leaving. ”

Her gentle voice as usual, she left after a deep bow.

“...That was my illusion... Right?”

Finishing their dinner for that night, the three decided to exchange information from the investigation in the living room of the detective agency.

The English teacher who named Carter. Blue hoodies that merchants wore when entering and exiting the school. Akira explained his conclusion from those to Kujou and Yui

“Your conclusion was too abrupt. Why do you think Carter was the offender?”

Kujou replied very calmly.

“Didn’t Takura bump into me at the front door? He was meeting with Carter there. And then for some reason I heard he said ‘that rascal’ because he was mad. Wasn’t Carter a teacher worked at that school? It shouldn’t be hard for him to get a blue hoodie!!”

“Then, your conclusion assumes that Carter, who was transferred, met with Tamura, who sneaked into the school, for some reason and then they did something, right?”

“Oh, right. However... Since I don’t understand the reason, I have to catch and ask him...”

Suddenly, Kujou smiled.

“This is your kind of thinking that is very direct. If you feel confident with your conclusion then go head.”

“Oh, oh, oh! I’ll do it!! I’ll solve the mystery with my conclusion!! Wahahahahaha!”

Akira felt a little surprised with Kujou’s unexpected response. Knowing that he was supported, he revealed all his triumph and enthusiasm.

“So what happened on your side?”

Kujou and Yui had been investigating the death of Tamura.

“The night before Tamura’s death, a person witnessed some people quarreling in the park. Since there weren’t that many street lights in the park,

the witness said he didn't know any details, like their faces; however, the person who was noisy seemed to have unkempt hair and wear a jersey."

"What were they quarreling about?"

"Unfortunately, that witness did not hear those details. It was just two people quarreling loudly."

"Usually, you would think that Tamura being killed after this argument is what would have happened."

Yui was fighting with fondant au chocolat and she answered with a little chocolate stuck on her lip.

Agreeing with that, Kujou replied, "Yes."

"Eh? But... Wait a second. But don't we not know if he was killed by Carter? What about the possibility they said on the news? Something like he was drunk so he fell down."

"That's impossible. In the past, he had acute alcohol intoxication and couldn't drink after that. In the first place, he seemed to be a non-drinker who couldn't even handle a single drop of alcohol. His families and a few of his old acquaintance provided testimonies like that."

"So the bottles near deceased Tamura were fake... Then, as I thought..."

Akira felt the the possibility of murder became higher. Information about Carter was lacking, which they wanted more of. Yui read Akira's thoughts when he crossed his arms, and she gave off a tone of voice indicating to end this conference.

"Let's survey the teacher named Carter, who was investigated by Akira, at first. Tomorrow, let's talk to Kentarou together."

1. Kumamoto – the capital city of Kumamoto Prefecture on the island of Kyushu, Japan.↵
2. As long as my eyes are still black – when she's still living (because eyes turn white after a person dies)↵

The next day, the three went to the school as soon as possible.

Separate from the other two people, Yui went to the classroom. Kujou asked straightforward questions to Nishino, who greeted them kindly in the principal's office.

"I have some questions regarding Mr. Robert Carter, the original English teacher."

"Eh?" Nishino was slightly astonished and stopped what he was doing.

"Where did you hear that from?"

"I heard it from my students. They said something like 'The pronunciation of the previous English teacher was authentic.'"

"Yes, since he was American."

"But I heard that he was suddenly transferred about a month ago."

Nishino started to wipe away the sweat over his forehead.

"We suspect that Mr. Carter was related to the case of Azusa. Will you please tell us what you know about him? For example, the reason he was transferred suddenly."

Kujou eyes were glittering profoundly. Nishino slowly opened his mouth with Kujou's sharp gaze on him.

"In our school, there is a mailbox in front of the student council room. The students can submit whatever they are concerned about for their school life or what they want to suggest. It is a so-called suggestion box. One day after school, at the time when almost all teachers left, Kitamikado, the president of the student council, came to me with a letter. She wanted me to read the contents without asking first... Then I read it as she told me to do so..."

"What was written on it?"

"... It exposed that... Mr.Carter was in a romantic relationship with a female student in our school."

"Ehh... Harsh...."

Akira expressed his disapproval instinctively when he heard the exposal.

“This was the first time something like that happened, so I am considering how to fix it. Personally, I think love itself should be free; however, the relationship between a teacher and a student is... People always have some thoughts on it... Plus, the female student is still a minor...”

“Then what did you do, Mr. Nishino?”

“I held a staff meeting. I was thinking about asking for the opinions of everyone.”

“I see.”

Kujou gave approval and sipped the green tea.

“Since it was related to the reputation of the school, did you handle it gently?”

Nishino answered, “Yes,” while wiping his sweat.

“Then, did Mr. Carter admit the truth?”

“Yes, he admitted it. He seemed to understand the positions of a student and a teacher; however, he said the student was such a gorgeous lady that he couldn’t control himself. He said it was all his fault.”

Umm, Kujou breathed out.

“I heard that Mr.Carter was transferred to Kumamoto¹. Is this correct?”

“Right. He was transferred to Higo² First High School.”

“Did he come back recently at any point?”

“No... I don’t think so. I have never heard about him being called back here after his transfer.”

“... Tamura didn’t go to Kumamoto; instead, Carter came to Tokyo... Also, why did they have to meet in the school... ”

Hearing Akira’s murmur, Kujou gave a side glance at him, then directed a question at Nishino.

“May I ask one more question? Did Mr. Carter say the name of the female

student who he was in love with?”

“No. He said he couldn’t hurt who he loved, so in the end, he didn’t say.”

“That’s enough. Much appreciated.” Kujou bowed and urged Akira to leave the principal’s office together..

However, when he was at the door, he turned back.

“I forgot something. I have one last question. Did the letter from the mailbox have the name of the sender on it?”

“No. It was anonymous.”

“I see... Then who knew about the contents of the letter in this school ? ”

“Including me and Kitamikado, there are only two. I only said it during the conference, and Kitamikado knew the contents, but she said she brought it to me without telling anyone else.”

“I see. I understood. I appreciate your help.”

Satisfied, Kujou bowed with a smile.

The sounds of the two’s footsteps resounded in the hallway.

Kujou’s expression turned serious.

“We are going back to the agency right now.”

“What? Right now!?”

Even though it was early in the afternoon, Kujou said to return. His steps were fast for some reason.

“By the way, Kujou, where did Yui go? I thought she came to the school with us.”

“Ah!” Kujou recalled and stopped walking immediately.

“She said she’s participating in dessert making from this morning in the Skills for Living classroom...”

“Yui’s ability of smelling desserts is at the Devil Level³... Should we pick her up... ”

Roughly one hour after that, at the detective agency.

“Which. One. Should. I. Choose?”

Failing to have desserts at school, the sullen Yui returned to a good mood looking at the cluster of bite-sized puddings prepared by Kujou

“I just thought about it, is our investigation finished today? We’ve only asked about Carter.”

“Oh, that’s enough. By the way, kid, for two days starting tomorrow, your time is mine.”

“... Eh?... What?... Are you eulogizing your love for me!?”

“Go die!!”

One photograph was flying onto Akira’s face. There was a girl in it.

“Wait, this girl... Isn’t she... Kyouko?”

“Yes. She is Kyouko Akihara, form Grade 11 Class 1 of Private Jouji Girl’s High School. She was the one who told you about Carter.”

“Uh....So what’s going on with this girl?”

Kujou said after he squinted his eyes and dropped his tone of voice.

“Akihara will be attacked during this break.”

Akira’s eyes widened.

“The offender of this case has a time limit and knows the police and we are investigating and chasing after them. As proof, the offences are escalating. That’s why the cornered offender pursued an outcome... Let’s start now.”

“Wait a second. Isn’t Carter loved by Kyouko?”

“Carter is in love with someone else.”

“Eh...Why...”

Recalling of Kyouko's sorrowful face, Akira gritted his teeth.

"There is a place I must go right now. I think I'll be back soon, but before I come back, you have to guard Akihara."

... To guard...

That also meant protecting Kyouko selflessly if she was actually attacked.

Anxiousness ran through Akira's body.

"If you are afraid, you can choose not to do it."

Yui said gently.

There was silence, as if they were waiting for Akira's reply.

"... I am... An idiot, so I can't make skillful conclusions like Kujou can; I can't perceive spirits like Yui can either. But... I wanted to do something... I was always trying to find... If there's something that I'm able to do. This case will be solved for Mr. Nishino. For that to happen, Kyouko has to be protected, right? Then I'll do it!! "

Akira thumped his chest with a fist while speaking.

"Good."

Yui accepted Akira's determination.

Akira, Yui, and Kujou looked at each other and smiled.

1. Kumamoto – the capital city of Kumamoto Prefecture on the island of Kyushu, Japan.↵
2. Higo – an old province of Japan in the area that is today Kumamoto Prefecture on the island of Kyushu.↵
3. Devil Level – a phrase describing a person's ability that are very strong.↵

9

During the evening of that day, Akira was guarding Kyouko. Although Kujou said it was fine to start the next day, Akira could not wait there leisurely, since

Kyouko might be attacked.

It was now past eighteen o'clock. The Sunroad Shopping Street at Kichijouji¹ was crowded by shoppers and people who were trying to get home. According to Kujou's profiling, offenders would not attack Kyouko at a crowded place. It's when Kyouko is walking through a place with less people by herself that he has to pay attention on.

... The man named Carter...

If he was an American, he should be tall and strong. If a man like that appeared around Kyouko, it would be very distinct. Thinking of this, Akira turned to look at the flow of the people on the shopping street; however, he did not see any one who looked like that.

After nineteen o'clock, Kyouko said goodbye to her friends, and rode the subway in order to get home.

The Inokashira Line of the subway was pretty crowded due to the commuter rush. Focusing on an English book, Kyouko let her body tremble with the subway.

Seven minutes after the subways started moving, she got off the subway at Takaido Station. Akira followed her.

Takaido Station intersected a major road named Kanjouhachigosen. In front of the lively station, there were many people passing it.

After examining the tickets, Akira looked back.

There wasn't anybody who looked suspicious.

To be safe, Akira ran after Kyouko.

Kyouko's home was located in a quiet residential area after a ten minute walk from the station.

It was a very ordinary house.

An ordinary girl from an ordinary family.

"...Why will someone like her become the victim..."

Looking at Kyouko who disappeared at the entrance, Akira murmured.

Nothing unusual happened today.

The second day of guarding.

This day, nothing related to the case happened either. With a red bean bun in his mouth, Akira spent the peaceful time chasing after a high school girl who was enjoying her break.

However, this peaceful time was broken on the next day.

The third day of guarding.

A little before noon, the door of the Akihara family's house was opened and Kyouko came out dressed in her uniform.

"What? Isn't there no school today?"

With this simple question, Akira started to follow her.

Kyouko rode the subway to Kichijouji.

Passing through Sun Road, she went to the gym after arriving at Jouji School.

"I see. I think she's part of the Volleyball Club."

Seeing of her retreating figure, Akira crossed his arms as if he was thinking.

Robert Carter.

The words 'The rascal' that Tamura said when he illegally enter the school and bumped into Akira. And then the teacher who was exposed for falling in love with a student and was transferred to Kumamoto. That person was aiming at Kyouko.

What was his motive? Akira closed his eyes.

Kujou said Carter was in love with someone besides Kyouko, which meant Kyouko discovered someone else as his lover, and it seemed possible that she put the letter into the mailbox.

...The revenge of the transfer...

Akira's conclusion was logical. Because of the man's selfish reason, the anger was accumulating.

"Damn it... How can this happened! Carter, I will break your intrigue!!"

The sun had completely sunk and the sky was dominated by darkness. It was half past twenty right now.

Because the competition was around the corner, all the club members practiced intensely; however, the long club meeting was about to end.

Kyouko finished changing and left the school. She went through the shopping street and headed the station of Inokashira Line as usual, however...

"... What?..."

Starting his tailing again, Akira felt something wrong.

She even passed the Kijijouji Station, and kept going towards the south alone.

Is she not going back home? ... Akira chased after her anxiously.

The road which led to the Onshi Park in Inokashira.

There were some folk art shops, hot dog stands, and fry chicken stands on both sides. But she went straight into the park without a single glance at them.

There was an enormous lake at the center of this park. Couples usually rode boats during weekends. Sakura bloomed everywhere within the park in spring, so the park was a famous cherry-blossom viewing spot.

Although this park was crowded during the day, it became unpopular during the night. This park was managed thoughtfully, but it wasn't bright everywhere. The black and deep street walk was dominated by darkness.

Akira made a deep sound at the back of his throat and tightened his breath.

Kyouko walked around the park for about ten minutes and then went past the bushes. She sat onto the bench, which was in the corner of a playground with large tracks. There was a famous museum near the park.

There was no one around. Since the light was far away, the area around the bench was pretty dark.

Akira held his breath and hid within the shadow of the trees.

A few seconds later, she turned on her phone to check the time and then turned it off immediately to look at the night sky.

“... What if... She’s just waiting for her boyfriend...?”

Her joyful and peaceful daily life from the past two days flashed through Akira’s mind.

“But... If that’s the case... It will be so awkward to keep on watching her.”

Akira didn’t have the hobby of peeking at other’s privacy. Now he attempted to look away.

The shadow behind Kyouko... Swayed.

Akira was rubbing his eyes to check if he had seen an illusion, but the shadow became darker and moved behind Kyouko silently.

The next moment, the jet black shadow moved abruptly.

Within the street lights’ dim light, a dull metal piece reflected a beam of light.

“It’s a knife!!”

Yelling, Akira ran out of the shadow of the trees at his fastest speed.

“Run away, Kyouko! He’s behind you!!”

Both she and the jet black shadow shouted in surprise.

However, the violent action did not stop.

The high-held piece of metal attacked Kyouko with murderous intent and greed.

Akira did not have any fear. The only thing in his mind was to protect Kyouko, so he hit the jet black shadow with his body.

The two people fell onto the ground.

Akira looked up to check Kyouko. She was holding her left hand and aching. He could tell that there was blood bleeding from that hand.

The close call, or the fatal injury, was avoided... But.

“...Damn it... She was injured...”

There was no time to regret.

The shadow was aiming at Kyouko’s life for sure. After fixing their position, they tried to hurt Kyouko again. But Akira had not simply fallen onto the ground. He had held the hand holding the knife tightly when he fell.

“Carter... I won’t release my hand... No matter what will happen!! ”

A person aimed at Kyouko’s life. A person protected it.

Their determinations collided and attacked each other in the dim darkness.

“No matter if you’re an American... If you’re an adult... I don’t care! I will protect Kyouko no matter what will happennnnnn!!”

Hearing that ghastly yell, the shadow used its full force violently.

Imaging the strength of an American, an adult, Akira used his full force to withstand it.

“I won’t let your hand go! This hand!”

“Won’t let it go... ”

“Let it go... Eh?... ”

Akira did not release his hand but showed an incredulous expression. He was trying to withstand a strength that would easily throw him away, so he used all his strength...

Contrary to his expectations, the right hand holding the knife could not even move under Akira’s force.

“That’s it!”

A familiar voice came from a close place.

Kujou came out from another shadow.

“Don’t worry. Although your wrist was hurt, it’s no big deal.”

Yui said in order to comfort Kyouko, who was sitting on the bench and aching.

Kujou stood next to Akira.

“The murders of Azusa Nishino and Yukitoshi Tamura. And the murder attempt to Kyouko Akihara. Those offences were all done by you”

Kujou shined his light on the jet black shadow who was holding a knife with murder intent.

“Mari Kitamikado.”

“What!?”

... The face that was lit...

Beautiful long, black hair and delicate facial features. Mari Kitamikado, the person who was the principal of the student council, who was overwhelmingly popular in the school and had greeted the three courteously, was there.

“... W, Why... Why are you here, Kitamikado? By the way, isn’t Carter the offender...!?”

Kujou continued depriving Mari from the knife.

“Carter isn’t the offender. He is, if anything, the victim.”

“What!? Carter is the victim!?”

“If Toshiyuki Tamura had killed Kyouko Akihara, then I reckon the series of cases would have been buried in the darkness.”

“Wait, wwwhat’s going on!?”

Kujou took a deep breath.

“This is an exchange murder.”

“An... Exchange murder!?... What’s that!?”

Kujou started to unravel the mysteries of these tangled cases.

“We considered the case of the murder of Azusa Nishino and the case of the murder attempt of Kyouko Akihara as completely different cases. We and the police only suspected the stalker Yukitoshi Tamura when Azusa Nishino was murdered from the side of his motivation. However, it was impossible for him to murder Azusa since he had an alibi.”

“Of course the person who killed Azusa Nishino was not Toshiyuki Tamura... Because it was Mari Kitamikado, who was right here.”

“Wwwwwwwwwwhat!!”

“And there’s one more case: Yukitoshi Tamura preparing to murder Kyouko Akihara.”

“W, wait a second, Kujou. Are you saying Kitamikado had reasons for killing Azusa? And does Tamura had reasons for killing Kyouko?”

“That is the key of this mystery. According to common sense, we know that killing a person requires motives. It is natural for people with motives to be suspected. However, you took advantage of the common interest between you two, and utilized it to do something that went against common sense. ”

Kujou turned his exceptionally serious gaze onto Mari Kitamikado.

“The person Yukitoshi Tamura wanted to kill was Azusa Nishino. The person Mari Kitamikado wanted to kill was Kyouko Akihara. This is the truth. But if they do it directly, they will show up to the police without a doubt. Thinking about that, you suggested exchanging victims. ”

“Exchanging the victims?”

“Yes. Yukitoshi Tamura would murder Kyouko Akihara, and Mari Kitamikado would murder Azusa Nishino. By doing this, the people who were related to the victims were able to create a perfect alibi. You told Tamura, right? To stay in a game center with a security camera near the scheduled date for the murder.”

“I see, that’s why Tamura had a perfect alibi. ”

“You finally understand, stupid.”

Kujou smiled gently.

“However... This did not go well in reality. You murdered Azusa Nishino according to the plan, and after that, Tamura was scheduled to murder Akihara, but I guess he said something like he really could do it and started complaining. So you two argued. Both in the school and in the park. Your anger increased day after day because you murdered Azusa first, and it finally exploded... And you let the momentum lead you to kill Tamura.”

The desolate park became even more silent.

After a while, Mari Kitamikado, who had listened without saying a word until now, slowly opened her mouth.

“Mr. Kujou, even if your inference is correct, I don’t have any reasons to murder Kyouko.”

“... Right... That was what I worried the most about, but then I suddenly realized, what if Mr. Carter was a key to this mystery?”

Mari’s eyes trembled slightly,

“Akihara, are you calm right now?”

Kujou turned around and tended to Kyouko.

Sitting beside Yui on the bench, Kyouko nodded.

“Then I have a few private questions to ask. I want you to answer me as soon as you can. Akihara, you like Mr. Carter. Is that true?”

Kyouko’s reaction showed her astonishment.

Then she replied silently, “... Yes... ”

“Have you told your feeling to the teacher? If you do not feel uncomfortable, I would like you to tell me something about it.”

Kujou urged her gently.

“I... Told him about my feelings. Since... I was the moral monitor... I’ve... Hesitated for a long time... I had to be the model of other students... However, at last... I was swept away by the will to tell him about my feeling...”

“And what was Mr. Carter’s response?”

“‘I’m happy about your feelings. Thank you. But as long as our relationship is teacher and student, I cannot answer to your feelings.’ He said to me.”

“... He never mixed official business with private affairs...” Akira finally understood the sentence Kyouko said on the rooftop.

“Is it okay for me to ask another question?”

Although what Kujou had asked was for solving the case, he continued asking ruthlessly.

“I have an important question to ask... You had an idea that Kitamikado and Mr. Carter were in love with each other, correct?”

Akira opened his mouth with silence and astonishment, like an idiot.

Kyouko hesitated to start speaking out the memory she sealed in her mind, which she could never forget.

“... That was... A day when the meeting of moral monitors was prolonged... When I was walking in the hallway and thinking about leaving school as soon as possible... I saw the door to the student council room was slightly ajar... I was thinking, ‘Who would be here at such a late time?’... When I peeped into the room from the door crack... I saw... That Mr. Carter and Kitamikado were... Kissing...”

Kyouko’s grief disappeared onto the ground with her tears.

“... If that was the case... He did not...He did not have to lie to me... He could have directly said that... He was already in love with someone else... And reject me... ”

No one was able to stop a heart’s cry, which became sobbing. Yui hugged her, who was doing that, gently.

“... I... ”

After a while, Kyouko slightly raised her face.

“... After I saw that... I was crying all the way at home... But when I was very tired and could not think of anything... There was suddenly a fire lighting in my

heart. It was lighting faintly even on the next day I woke up... ‘Keep it down... Keep it down...’ I kept thinking that, but... When I met Kitamikado at school... I accidently... Spoke out...”

“What did you say?”

“I said, ‘Although love is unconstrained, as the moral monitor, I have some thoughts on the romantic relationship between a teacher and a student within the school. Since you are the president of the student council, please be prudent about secretly meeting with Mr. Carter in school...’”

“I see... A while after that, Mr. Carter was transferred, correct?”

“Yes. That’s right.”

Calming down, Kyouko showed an relaxed expression.

Kujou looked like he was satisfied as he turned around.

“I was thinking that Akihara had a romantic relationship with Mr. Carter at first, because the person who brought the letter from the suggestion box to the principle was you, Kitamikado; however, if that’s what was happening, I couldn’t find any reason for you aiming at Akihara. So I thought about it in a different direction. Then I found the reason why you had to murder Akihara.”

The empty park.

This place, which was dominated by darkness and silence, became even more quiet, as if it had something to confess.

Kujou narrowed his eyes silently.

“If the exchange murder went as planned, then there would probably be no way to prove it; however it failed, so there is evidence that shows that you had committed two murders and one murder attempt. I reckon it would be very clear if we checked your alibi. I think this is enough. Can you tell the whole truth? Kitamikado, you attempt to be perfect at everything.”

“... Oh, well.”

Being stared at by everyone, Mari sighed once and crossed her arms. As a lady, she organized her thoughts into words elegantly.

“It was a coincidence that I met Tamura. I witnessed him chasing after Nishino after school. But I left him there. If I did not know anything about Nishino, then that man did not matter to me. He would do nothing to my life. ”

“Then how did you get to know Tamura?”

“I didn’t mean to get close with him... Until... I saw that. It was all Kyouko’s... Your faults.”

“On... Me...?”

Kyouko murmured with astonishment.

“You are a great moral monitor. As a model for everyone in school, you controlled the atmosphere of it in a good way. I was impressed.”

Mari smiled gently.

“However... You failed. You fell in love with a wrong person. This is what you should know through your experience,”

“ ... ”

Now Mari’s negative spirit showed up from the depths of her smile.

“When I received the advice from Akihara, I contacted Tamura.”

“... Mr. Kujou... Mr. Tamura was a really pitiful person...When his zealous love was broken in front of him... That heartlessness and humiliation... Can you understand?”

Mari sympathized with Tamura’s sorrow with her face down.

“But you seduced Tamura.”

“‘Seduced’ is such a bad word to use. It was Tamura who changed his love into hate. By chance, our interests were the same. We both wanted someone to disappear from this world. That’s all.”

“Wait a second. What do you mean by ‘That’s all?’ You didn’t have to kill people!! Plus, exchanging victims means you were going to kill a person you didn’t even know!? How can you do that so easily!”

Akira’s common sense made him disdainful of Mari’s explanation, which went against common sense.

“I don’t expect a person like you to understand. To remove the one that may threaten ourselves was the family rule when Kitamikado Plutocrat² was established. However... Mr. Tamura could not understand our sublime teaching.”

“Then... How did you...”

“I gave him a reward.”

“A reward?”

Mari smiled coquettishly at the confused Akira and spoke with a sweet voice.

“Yes. He looked like he did not know a single woman, so I used my body to teach him.”

The obscene words leaked out from the lady were insane.

“As Mr. Kujou said, it was an exchange murder. As long as we could exchange victims, everything would be successful. Thus, I gave him two things to show my determination to Mr. Tamura: my body and the murder of Azusa... However... He was such a jerk.”

Mari pointed to her cheek with her finger, and posed a cute troubled face.

“Then you asked Tamura to come to the school.”

Kujou calmly analyzed Mari’s words, which were said with madness.

“I even prepared the merchant hoodies, but he did nothing. At last, he wanted my body again, so I gave him a slap instead.”

“... I see... And then he bumped into me in front of the door.”

All the mysteries were solved.

“Even after a while, Tamura didn’t even show me his intention to murder Akihara. That’s why you cornered Tamura this time.”

Mari was still smiling with insanity.

“That night, at the park, Tamura was finding excuses frantically for himself.”

The situation right before Tamura’s death showed up.

He appealed with tears:

"I know your determination. Just give me a little bit more time. With a little bit more time, I will set my heart. I can set my determination. So I want to push it back a little bit... In order to kill Kyouko Akihara... In order to kill her, before killing her, let me have sex with you!!"

When Tamura's desire gushed out, Mari's jet black darkness was detonated.

"... By the time I realized... I was holding rocks covered by my blood."

Lit by the moon coming out from the clouds, Mari's ecstatic smile showed her strange view of life.

When she murdered Azusa Nishino, to her, it was just a phase she had to go through. It might have been triggered by the teaching of the Kitamikado Plutocrat, or the fault of the empty heart she was born with. No, both of them were possible reasons.

The heart of the arrogant lady was finally broken and went berserk.

Unable to bear seeing that anymore, Kujou changed the topic.

"By the way, you said that it was all Kyouko's fault, which means she discovered the romantic relationship between you and Mr. Carter, right? Can you tell me more regarding that?"

The night wind slightly messed up Mari's hair.

She looked down, and started to talk as if she was yearning to recall the past.

"I started to date Mr. Carter about half year ago. He was intelligent and humorous, and most importantly, he was mature. He would accept my willfulness without a single frown."

Mari suddenly looked up to the moon

"Since I was very small, I was taught that I must act perfect in front of people. So in school, I must act like a popular and perfect president of the student council. One day, he appeared in front of me. At first, we talked in the student council room. And after that lunch, in the morning, I spent all my extra time

with him. That was when I realized, that I was not my usual self when I was with him... I could take off the mask I was always wearing... That was the moment I felt my new life had begun. I felt I had received a brilliant school life that I did not have before. ”

A princess who had found her prince was over there. Such hope-filled eyes became a color of nothingness that swallowed everything up when facing Kyouko.

“You broke our relationship.”

A voice lacking emotions came out from the mouth distorted in the shape of a new moon,

Kyouko’s face cramped up due to fear.

“She saw what she shouldn’t have seen. However... She should have hidden it at the bottom of her heart without ever saying it out loud. Her degrading heart caused by the envy emerging from her lover being taken away broke everything... Understand? Miss Bitch?”

“... Oh?... Hearing that, I have a question.”

Kujou showed the face of a detective.

“Oh, really? What is it?”

“The person who brought the letter to the principal office was you, Kitamikado, correct? If that’s true, then normally, the one who wrote the letter would be Akihara. Then I want to ask Akihara: Did you put the letter in the box in front of the student counselor office in order to expose that Kitamikado and Carter were in love?”

“No. I’ve never done that.”

Detesting the word of expose, Kyouko denied straightforwardly.

“Yes. That’s what I thought.”

As usual, Kujou was staring at Mari all the time.

“Mr. Kujou, you are such a playful person. In fact, you’ve already solved the case, right?”

Suddenly, Kujou smiled.

“I have no match for you... As you see, that letter was written and posted by me.”

“Eh!? Wait a minute! Why did you do something that would strangle yourself!?”

After thinking about it, Akira screamed at Mari’s absurd actions.

Mari opened her arms up wide at the starry sky.

“Kitamikado Plutocrat... Does not allow me, who is always perfect... To have a single blemish. Furthermore, it’s ridiculous to let someone to have an advantage over me.”

Then she spoke in a refreshing tone, as if she got rid of everything.

“So... Before he became my blemish, I let him go.”

Mari’s joyful laughter continued.

“... Y... ou... What the heck... ”

The repressed murmur could not be heard by her.

“What the heck! Are you kidding me!!”

Akira’s feeling that accumulated over and over exploded.

“Kitamikado!! Don’t you know Carter well!? When had Carter betrayed you! Wasn’t he the only person with whom you were able to take your mask off and trust!! Hadn’t you loved him from the bottom of your heart?”

Mari calmly received the question filled with wrath and sorrow.

“Flowers are... Most glamorous when they are picked at the moment they bloom... The same is with love... I wanted to preserve it as a beautiful memory within me before it got dirty. What’s wrong with that?”

A loud sound.

There was a sound of a big slap echoing in the park.

“Let me tell you, idiot. Carter did not tell anyone about you even at the end. He really cared about you! And You! Discarded him!”

Kyouko held the hand that she slapped Mari with strongly, and tears dropped. She was crying out from her heart with all her voice.

“... No... It shouldn't have happened...”

Mari looked down weakly.

“You couldn't even believe the man you loved, but you believed in others when murdering people. Ridiculous. That's why you betrayed Tamura as well.”

Kujou's strict voice slapped her ears.

“Trust is not a thing to be provided with. It's received from a person who knows you well. Know that trust created by interests is even thinner than a piece of paper.”

Kujou took one step forward as he told her in a gentle voice different from before.

“... And then... I have to tell you another thing... That what Akihara had said was true. I went to Kumamoto during those two days.”

Mari's hair swayed slightly.

“Mr. Carter continued working as an English teacher vigorously. So after talking with him for a while, I asked him about his relationship with you. I even told him that I've heard everything from the principal of Jouji School... And what do you think he said?”

Kujou's face was clouded with sorrow.

“... To the very end... He didn't say anything about his relationship with you...”

Mari's shoulders trembled silently. Then she frantically tried to stop the voice leaking out with hands.

However, when she knew the truth, she couldn't control the torrent of feelings that had already overflowed once.

Several translucent teardrops wetted her feet.

Thus, this case came to an end.

1. Kichijouji – a neighborhood in Tokyo, Japan.↵

2. Kitamikado Plutocrat – a company belongs to the Kitamikado family.

↵

10

A few days after Mari was arrested.

This case had been reported on TV for several days in a row. Compared to the truth, the main point of the reports was mostly focusing on how bad and inhuman the offender was.

Sometimes, freedom of reports would become the their violence. It was the same for this case. Every station tried every way to attack Mari, the suspect.

Akira took a deep breath.

“There is no value watching this.”

While speaking, Yui powered the TV off.

“Hey, Yui... Kitamikado... Was she an abnormal person like they said she was on TV...? ”

Akira murmured in a soft voice,

“Do you agree with that?”

“No... I don’t think so... It might be weird...”

“Kitamikado’s sense of value... Was same as the colors of the traffic lights.”

“... The color of the... Traffic lights... ”

Akira looked up at the ceiling and recalled the majority and minority conversation that Kujou had talked about.

“... The color she had been seeing... What kind of color was it...”

“At least not the color that the majority sees. And that’s her common sense, and all her values.”

“Had she been seeing the wrong color?”

“I cannot say it’s wrong... Her way to express the color... Was simply incorrect.”

While saying that, Yui sipped the black tea with a little sense of loneliness.

Wishing to blow away the heavy atmosphere, Akira asked with an abnormal amount of energy.

“Speaking of which, Kujou, have you reported to Nishino about this case?”

“Of course! It is the basics for a detective to report to the client swiftly and courteously. Don’t compare me to your bird brain¹.”

After reminding Akira like that, Kujou took a deep breath.

“... Well... But... I had a complex facial expression... Even though the case was solved, the offender was a student from his own school.”

“But,” Yui smiled joyfully.

“When I said that ‘The spirit of Azusa behind Kentarou is smiling happily,’ he was delighted from the bottom of his heart. That report was probably the most delightful ever.”

“ I see. Azusa felt happy about that.”

Influenced by Yui, Akira laughed happily.

However, he recalled something, and turned his face to Kujou.

“Hey. Since when did you discover that Carter was not the offender?”

“Since the very beginning.”

“What!? You lied!! Didn’t you feel that Carter was the offender like me!!”

“Then, little kid, why did you think Carter was the offender?”

“Eh!? That’s because... When Tamura bumped into me at the front gate of the school, he said ‘That rascal²’ when he passed by me, so I thought the offender might be a man since the beginning. Then after some investigation, there were only two men who were suspicious.”

“Did Tamura say ‘That rascal³?’”

“I’m not lying! He said ‘That rascal⁴’ for sure!!”

“No. I am asking whether you heard the word ‘That rascal’ in Kanji or not.”

“What!?” Akira opened his eyes widely.

“N... No... I am sure that I heard ‘That rascal’ in Kanji... So... That was...”

Kujou sighed once.

“You mixed Tamura’s ‘That rascal’ in Hiragana with ‘That rascal’ in Kanji. With different ways of expression, your brain arbitrarily converted ‘That rascal⁵,’ which represented the indignation of expressions, into ‘That rascal⁶,’ which separated the two genders. Was that the inception?”

“BBBBBut, usually when people hear ‘Rascal⁷,’ don’t they feel like it was referring to a man!?”

“Seriously... That’s why I said this in the beginning. Be careful about this: if you only focus on common sense, you may lose the basic of matters. As a loser and trash and idiot you really make me want you to disappear, and the dizziness makes me want to die.”

“Wait, wait, wait!!”

Akira attacked Kujou, who was criticizing, with his positive way of thinking. Then Yui smiled looking at them.

Today, the usual voice of curses, confusion, and laughter at Hakoniwa Detective Agency returned.

Akira felt the horror brought by the living darkness, which was darker than the phantoms, by himself.

However...

The case regarding humans that Kujou dealt with.

And the case regarding spirits that Yui dealt with.

Both of them were work that would help a person that would help someone.

Akira thought that with confidence.

In his opinion, he enjoyed this part of the detective agency.

1. Bird brain – a Japanese phrase which describes a person with a head like a sieve.↵

2. That rascal – “rascal” in Kanji.↵

3. That rascal – “rascal” in Kanji.↵

4. That rascal – “rascal” in Kanji.↵

5. That rascal – “rascal” in Hiragana.↵

6. That rascal – “rascal” in Kanji.↵

7. That rascal – “rascal” in Hiragana.↵

Chapter 2: Purification during Teatime

1

“Hey~ Yui~~~ Hurry up~”

Finished draping a black jacket over his shoulders, Akira Satou slightly fixed the position of the scarf around his neck, and then yelled at the second floor.

After a moment of silence, an adorable voice that sounded like a bell answered.

“I’m coming.”

With some noises, a girl in a duffle coat with red and white plaid patterns appeared on the stairs connecting to the entrance hall.

She was the girl who was called by Akira. She was Yui Mikami, the master of Hakoniwa Detective Agency.

She hurried running downstairs. A white casquette matching with a white scarf complimented her beautiful chestnut brown hair, which was swaying due to the wind.

“... Ado, adora...”

Akira probably wanted to say “Adorable,” but before he could finish, a duster was poking at him between his eyebrows.

“Don’t look at Miss Yui in such a vulgar way.”

Akira was attempting to grasp happiness, but it was deprived from him so suddenly and vigorously. He fell onto his knees while quivering, and leaked the floor¹.

It was Koushirou Kujou, the butler of this house. Encompassed by a black suit, he was a famous detective who did what a devil would do without changing a single facial expression.

“Wait, you... That really hurts.”

Pressing the place between his eyebrows, Akira declared with hate.

“Hurt? ... I see... I apologize.”

“What!?” Akira opened his eyes widely and looked up because Kujou, who always said haughty things arrogantly, made an apology.

“Wh, what. Kujou, I thought you never apologize.”

“If you feel pain, that means I didn’t kill you with one shot. Next time, I will do better...”

“You can go die!!”

Gorgeously ignoring the daily trifle between them, Yui went downstairs lightly.

“Then, Kujou, I’m leaving.”

While speaking, Yui started to wear a pair of suede boots, which were slightly orange.

“Miss Yui, why are you in that much of a hurry to go out?”

“There aren’t any cases this afternoon, so I accepted Akira’s invitation.”

The moment when Kujou heard the sentence, murderous intent flowed out of him like a torrent.

“Hey, kid! To where are you going to abduct Miss Yui!! Confining her in a mansion!? Escaping to a northern country!? Are you going to sell her overseas!!”

“You idiot!! That’s impossible!! It’s so strange of you to come up with the idea of abduction in the first place!!”

Two people were staring at each other at the entrance hall and wiping their own forehead.

“I’m leaving without you.”

Yui had already finished wearing her shoes, and simply split the two up.

“What!?”

Kujou and Akira stretched out their right hands unintentionally at Yui, who broke the touch-and-go situation, in order to tsukkomu² her.

They had a close relationship.

Rushed by Yui, who was already prepared, Akira started wearing his shoes quickly.

“Kujou, don’t be concerned about me. There’s a winter dessert fiesta held by a dessert shop around Shinjuku. We are just going there.”

“Desserts? Do you want me to buy some for you?”

“No, I want to breathe some fresh air to change my mood sometimes.”

“I see. Be careful on the way. And, please do not eat too much.”

Different from the way he interacted with Akira, Kujou showed the gentleness a mother would have.

“We’ll be fine. It is said that desserts are digested by a different stomach³. If I’m too full to eat the food you make, I will put them into Akira’s stomach.”

With her face beaming with smiles, Yui showed a smug expression.

“... She messed up the meaning of ‘a different stomach...’”

Kujou could not say that because he was overprotective of Yui.

“Alright! Sorry for the waiting, Yui. Let’s go”

After finishing tying his shoes, he stood up with energy. Yui nodded and put her hand on the door.

However, contrary to Yui’s will, the door opened by itself.

It was around thirteen o’clock.

The bright sky and sunshine of a fair winter day flowed into the entrance hall at once and dazzled the three.

Kujou used his hand to cover some of the sunshine and gazed into the light.

There was a person's figure.

"Excuse me, is this Hakoniwa Detective Agency?"

A woman's voice said that she was a client.

1. Leaked the floor – a Japanese phrase used in MMORPG (massively multiplayer online role-playing games) to describe the situation that a character of a player cannot fight anymore. When the character faces down, he looks like he is leaking he floor.↵
2. Tsukkomu – making an immediate response to ridicule or question another person.↵
3. A different stomach – a Japanese phrase describing that no matter how full a person is, his stomach will always has room for desserts.↵

2

She wore a gray sweatshirt, sweatpants, and a down coat, something that wouldn't be considered warm by anyone. Her hair, that wasn't tousled, was tied with a scrunchie.

The woman carried a rucksack and a small carrier bag.

Although the three were bewildered at the sudden visitor, as long as she knew this was a detective agency and came, she should be a client.

Yui, Akira, Kujou, and the visitor.

Nobody knew what to do.

Only silence continued...

However.

Someone broke the awkward atmosphere. It was Yui. She observed the visitor from head to toe carefully.

... And then...

"Alright, no problem. Akira, let's go!!"

Yui told them with energy and then dashed by the client and went out the entrance.

“What!?”

Yelling hysterically, Akira followed Yui, who had left without him.

“Wait, Miss Yui!!”

Kujou yelled loudly at Yui, who had dashed out the door and ignored the client.

But immediately.

“That’s not my duty, this task is handed over to you!!”

While saying so, Yui waved her hands at Kujou vigorously near the front door. Then the two disappeared into the streets before the butler could reply.

“Oh well,” Kujou released a breath.

As for the visitor, she didn’t understand what was going on with the three and just stood by the side of the entrance.

Cold winter wind blew into the entrance hall from the widely opened door.

Wishing to hide that scene, Kujou closed the door carefully and greeted the woman, who was standing in shock from the very beginning.

“I apologize for the unsightly situation that happened. You are a client, right? Welcome to Hakoniwa Detective Agency.”

Although the owner said “No problem,” a client who came to a detective agency must have some sort of problem.

Thinking of that, Kujou smiled gently and greeted the visitor.

The organized, antique furniture and the bookshelf that covered a whole wall with books to the ceiling made the reception office very impressive.

The sunshine that came from the windows brought gentleness to the quiet room.

Kujou poured Earl Grey black tea into a tea cup that had brilliant blue and golden lines and placed it in front of the client.

“By the way, I haven’t asked your name.”

While speaking, he sat down onto a single seater sofa.

“My name is Yumiko Kinoshita.”

Nervousness could be found within her subtle voice.

“I ought to have introduced myself first. My name is Koushirou Kujou, the butler and detective of Hakoniwa Detective Agency.”

“You are a butler?”

“Right. Miss Yui is the master of the house and agency. She was the girl who dashed by your side.”

“That adorable girl is the owner!? Oh? Then what about the other guy?”

“Oh. He’s just the person who does the odd jobs.”

While smiling gently, Kujou continued the conversation.

“So why did you come to our agency? I am also a detective, you can tell me the case.”

Yumiko’s expression stiffened at this statement.

Then she squeezed her voice out slowly.

“In fact... My mom... Experienced kamikakushi¹.”

They were able to slightly hear the sound of the crackle of the silently burning firewood from the fireplace.

Kujou fixed his position from sitting down on the sofa to putting his hand by his mouth and bending his upper body forward.

“So... She... Disappeared?”

Yumiko nodded, “Yes.”

“Since when?”

“Since a week ago, I think.”

“Have you contacted the police?”

“No, I haven’t. She’s a little prone to being vagabond, so I think maybe she’ll just come back after some time.”

“Instead of posting a notice for a disappearing person... You came to a detective agency?”

“Ah... Umm.. If I ask the police to post a notice, it’ll become serious. I’ll feel sorry for the police if she comes back right after they post it out... P, plus, the police won’t believe in kamikakushi... When I searched if there would be a good solution on the Internet, I found Hakoniwa Detective Agency, which could solve even occult cases.”

“I see. I understand. Then I have another question. Does your father understand that you did not post the notice of a disappearing person?”

“My father... Passed away when I was young. My mom raised me up by herself.”

Although Kujou felt a moment of darkness in Yumiko’s language, he continued the conversation.

“I see... I apologize. Sorry for making you recall painful memories.”

While saying “It’s fine,” she drank the the warm black tea.

“So your request is to find your mother?”

Kujou confirmed her request plainly, and Yumiko nodded.

“I understand. So firstly, can I ask something about you and your mother? ”

“Something? About me?”

Her expression stiffened suddenly.

Although Kujou did not overlook her action, he continued asking with a smile.

“Of course. If you don’t want to say, it is okay. Let’s see, then can I ask about your age and career?”

Even though Kujou could tell most of the answers to the questions by looking her clothing and belongings, he started asking about his client.

“I’m a college student and I’m twenty-one.”

Talking about herself was probably uncomfortable to Yumiko, since she answered bluntly.

“I see. It’s the most enjoyable period of time.”

In order to dissolve her wariness, he smiled softly.

Contrary to Kujou’s expression, her tone was cold.

“It’s not enjoyable at all... At that kind of place.”

“Oh,” while speaking, he narrowed his eyes.

“You can enjoy clubs while being boisterous with your friends, you can grumble about the professors you hate to them in a cafe, and you can have drinking parties with them. Isn’t it enjoyable? Being a college student.”

“College is not a place for fun!!”

She was suddenly incensed.

It was a sudden change from her introvert expression. Her eyes were bloodshot and she breathed roughly through her widely opened mouth repeatedly.

Although Kujou only mentioned school life that everyone would consider as enjoyable, she became extremely unpleasant.

However, this sudden change excited Kujou’s curiosity.

“I see. You are such a diligent person. Then you must have already received enough credits for graduation. Good for you.”

His words rubbed Yumiko the wrong way even more.

“I don’t care about graduation!”

“Oh? Are the lectures difficult?”

“That’s because the professors explain so poorly that I can’t even understand!!”

“Then tests are strenuous for you as well, right?”

“If I don’t go to school, I don’t have to take them!!”

“Then you’ll have to stay in the same grade.”

“Shut up!! Why are you saying the same thing as her!! I am a NEET², so college is nothing to me!!”

Yumiko slapped on the table in front of her intensely, and all the anger and depression that was stored was expressed at Kujou’s question.

Her relationship with friends. Academics. Relationship with family. And her current status. Kujou was satisfied for being able to glimpse at those from their conversation. In order to calm Yumiko down from rapidly breathing, Kujou recommended her to have some warm Earl Grey tea and strawberry shortcake.

“Exactly as what you said, college is not a place people should be forced to go. I understand your pain.”

She calmed down probably because she was pacified. Yumiko sipped the black tea that Kujou recommended.

“By the way, we’re in the middle of questions. Please let me continue. Let me ask about your mother. Please tell me her name and age.”

“Her name is Harue Kinoshita. Her age is forty-seven.”

“And what is her career?”

“She is in charge of the projects in an IT company. ”

“That’s cool. She’s a career woman. Then she can raise you all by herself.”

“It’s not inconvenient in my daily life, but she looks like she’s very busy and she’s rarely at home. ”

Kujou put his hand on his chin and narrowed his eyes, then he smiled and quickly started to talk.

“Then, was there anything unusual about her right before her disappearance?”

The conversation stopped right here.

Yumiko turned her face down, looked like she was thinking.

Kujou was looking at her struggling, and waited.

“... Will you laugh at me?”

Yumiko looked up at Kujou and said.

“No, I won’t. Detectives always face any cases seriously.”

Encouraged by Kujou’s gentle smile, she opened her mouth.

“My mom... She said there is a zashikiwarashi³ in our home.”

“Oh. A zashikiwarashi.”

After kamikakushi, a zashikiwarashi appeared.

Kujou’s curiosity was excited.

“Right. When I heard that, I thought it was a good thing, but my mom was unusually scared, so I asked her for the reason. And then my mom said that if a zashikiwarashi appears, then the home will be ruined.”

“Your mother really knows a lot.”

“Eh?! So that is true!?”

Kujou breathed in softly, and slowly began to say.

“Zashikiwarashi the youkai⁴. It’s often said that the home with zashikiwarashi will be prosperous; the home with a leaving one will decline. It appears like a child, and is an adorable youkai which only plays tricks on family members. This is probably what normal people in the world know about it. However, the folklore of zashikiwarashi includes something that people do not talk about nowadays... The event that serves at the origin of the folklore... It is said that zashikiwarashi is a child who was buried in the soil far away from home. ”

“A child... Who was killed by his parents?”

“Yes, that’s true. The folklore of zashikiwarashi is mainly told in the north-eastern area. Once upon a time, during the winter of a snow region, there was a famine. The infants who were treated as more mouths for their parents to feed were killed by the pressure of millstones. There seemed to be a secret custom of burying corpses within the house. Over time, that custom was intertwined with other stories, and it was said that zashikiwarashi was a youkai which can bring happiness. And that is what zashikiwarashi is nowadays.”

“Such a horrible custom... ”

Yumiko was shocked by the cruel folklore. She put her hand by her mouth and her body stiffened.

“It is a pretty old story as an origin. There’s nothing we can help with the secularity.”

Kujou breathed out softly.

“By the way, is Mrs. Harue familiar with youkai from long ago?”

Hearing what Kujou has just said, Yumiko tried to form her language.

“What happened? Did you recall anything, even a part of your memories?”

“Ah... I...”

“Yes. Anything will be fine. Please tell me.”

Encouraged by Kujou’s smile, Yumiko opened her mouth with fear.

“Umm... In fact... Not only my mom... I can also perceive youkai. Not only can I perceive them, but I’m also possessed by them all the time; thus, I’m... Unfortunate.”

With his smiling eyes slightly open, Kujou said an “Oh” again today.

1. Kamikakushi – the phenomenon of a sudden disappearance of a person. It was believed to be done by a god in the past.↵

2. NEET – the acronym for a young person who is “Not in Education, Employment, or Training.”↵

3. Zashikiwarashi – a child-like youkai from a Japanese folklore.↵

4. Youkai – a class of supernatural monsters and spirits in Japanese folklore.↵

3

“So you said that there were some chimimouryou¹ following you.”

Kujou slowly said it again, as if he was making sure of her words.

The answer was a silent nod.

“Since a long time ago?”

“I don’t know, but by the time I realized, I had already been able to see them.”

“I see. Psychics with high ability to perceive spirits can perceive them very clearly. It is said that they don’t even recognize them as spirits. Maybe you were able to perceive them since a long time ago. ”

“Yeah, yeah,” Kujou showed his understanding.

“Then, being possessed by what kind of youkai² makes you unfortunate?”

Relieved because of Kujou accepting of her hysteric words, Yumiko started to talk about what she saw.

“What first appeared was a betobeto-san³. When I was on my way home in the evening by myself, something was following after me. But nothing was there when I looked back. Repeating that process, I eventually arrived home. That night, I heard the sound of footsteps coming from the hallway in our house, but no one should’ve been there. It was the same sound as the one I had heard in the evening. It came to the entrance of my room and stopped. I was so scared that I closed my eyes under the quilt and shivered. Then when I realized, the indication disappeared... However... The night of the second day... I heard the same sound again. It lasted for several days... There was definitely a betobeto-san in our house!”

Kujou listened with deep interest while wiping his forehead with his hand.

“Betobeto-san is a type of youkai that appears at night and follows after people. But it only follows them without harming them; however, it is a kind of youkai that is interested in human. I guess, maybe when you met betobeto-san at night, you took him home with you. After that?”

Yumiko looked like she recalled some cold and scary memories, and she crossed her arms in front of her chest like she was holding herself, then kept talking with a trembling voice.

“I was scared and haunted by the sound of betobeto-san’s footsteps, but I couldn’t do anything, so I tried to forget about it and went to bed early. I thought I could forget about it while sleeping. And then... And then...

Makurakaeshi⁴ appeared! I wanted to sleep but I could not!! When my consciousness was slumbering, the moment I thought I could finally sleep, my pillow was turned around, and brought me back to the reality again!! ... Enough... Everyday, everyday... I'm sick of it..."

Yumiko's hatred, which was accumulated inside, of the youkai leaked out. Her fear, which even caused her to shiver, seemed to have gradually transformed from hatred into anger.

Kujou looked at her silently.

"When the youkai cornered me mentally and put me in a half panic situation, no one gave me a hand. No one even wanted to listen to me... And then a hidarugami⁵ came to me. However, it was just a youkai with a name of a god. Being possessed by hidarugami, lethargy attacked me, and I could not even wake up from my bed everyday. Many youkai came to my place one by one, like they resented me. And then few days ago! Even azukiarai⁶ appeared. It made the shakishakishaki sound washing the red beans! The sound was so annoying that I felt tired both physically and mentally!! What's going on with them!? How unfortunate do they want me to be!! "

Her tragic scream echoed in the quiet reception office.

After hearing that, Kujou raised his head, and said with a index finger at the corner of his mouth.

"Makurakaeshi and azukiarai are common youkai that everyone had heard of at least once, but hidarugami.... Hidarugami is a kind of youkai that possesses people who are walking, then makes them feel extremely hungry and tired, and plays jokes as bad as making their arms, legs or body paralyzed. Sometimes, but rarely, when they overdo it, the person who was possessed may even die. It is witnessed often in the deep mountains. Hidarugami appearing in the streets is very rare... It is so interesting that it makes me dizzy."

Then he smiled.

"You believe... What I have just said!?"

"Yes, of course."

His words calmed Yumiko down.

“Th, then! Then, please exorcise the youkai on me!! This detective agency handles occult cases, right? Then please exorcise them!! I can’t succeed even I try everything. I don’t have good luck. I am underprivileged. All my misfortunes are caused by the youkai!! ”

Clenching a fist and knocking on her knee violently, Yumiko talked about exorcising the hateful youkai desperately.

Kujou stared at Yumiko, as if he had seen through her deepest part of her heart.

A moment of silence.

A faint vibration resounded in the silence.

The vibration informed Kujou that his smartphone, which was inside his inside pocket, had an incoming call.

“Excuse me.”

Saying that, he tapped the “answer” button.

“Hey~~~ Kujou. How’re you doing~?”

He heard the loud voice of Akira, who was enthusiastic.

The action of Kujou holding the phone far away from his ear with such a miserable expression looked ridiculous to Yumiko.

“What? Kid, I’m working right now. Say what you want clearly and briefly... Eh? What happened to you? Your breathing is rough.”

Hearing Akira’s shortness of breath over the speaker, Kujou focused on Akira and listened carefully.

“Yeah. Yui walked so fast when she was aiming at desserts. Even following her was driving me to death. Oh! And!! Listen to me, Kujou!! I’m in Hatsudai^Z right now, and the the cakes of the cafe are so~ Delicio...”

Looking at the Kujou who couldn’t bear it and ended the call abruptly, Yumiko bursted into laughter.

“I apologize for the unsightly situation.”

“Were they the people I just met at the entrance?”

“Right, he’s Akira, the person who does the odd jobs. He’s so stupid that sometimes I don’t know what to say to him. He’s someone who should jump from the capital freeway like a pinball and be smashed into pieces right now.”

Since Kujou was always using polite manners and language in front of Yumiko but now he was being insulting, her face beamed with a smile because of the disparity.

“I heard some of the conversation. Is he in Hatsudai?”

“I think so. He said he’s going to a dessert fiesta held around Shinjuku.”

“My home is around there! There are many old stores, but there are also many delicious dessert stores and cafe.”

“Because the shopping street existed not far from the main street since a long time ago, we can say they are the hidden renowned stores.”

While speaking, Kujou stood up from the sofa.

“Let’s change our mood. Please wait a second. I’ll bring you tea and cakes.”

The teacups with elegant designs and fruit tarts were placed in front of Yumiko. When the water, which had started to boil without her noticing, was cooled down to a suitable temperature, it was poured into a glass teapot with Nilgiri tea.

Looking at the tea leaves that were jumping⁸, Yumiko was fascinated by his amazing skills.

“By the way, did you say you wanted me to exorcise the youkai?”

She moved her attention away from the jumping tea leaves onto Kujou.

“Yes. Kujou, can you do that!?”

Kujou closed his eyes to avoid her eyes, which were filled with anticipation. After few seconds of silence, he said quietly.

“Some people also call exorcising youkai as purification. It sounds like it’s quite simple. Yumiko, do you know what it really is?”

“Eh?... Is it something like... Using holy scriptures or amulets?”

“Yes, those are not incorrect. But do you know why do holy scriptures and amulets have the power to exorcise?”

“U~~~mm...” Although Yumiko contemplated for a while, she seemed like she did not have an answer.

“For example... You use computer keyboards to type for work and emails, right? When you want to erase the words that are wrong, what will you do?”

“Then... I’ll use the Backspace key or the Delete key.”

“Yeah, you’re correct.”

Kujou continued the conversation with a gentle smile.

“In something like the computer programming language, the word ‘Delete’ means to erase. Then, here’s a sign pen. If I write ‘Delete’ onto your arm, will you disappear from this world?”

Saying so, Kujou took out a pen suddenly, and pretended to write ‘Delete’ onto her arm.

However, feeling the seriousness of Kujou, she pulled her arm back instinctively.

“Hahaha, I’m just kidding.”

“No... Your eyes were serious.”

“That never happened~”

Kujou’s smile only continued.

But Yumiko felt the smile was terrifying.

“So, what do you think? You haven’t answered my question.”

“Even if you write ‘Delete’ on me, it doesn’t mean I’m going to disappear.”

“Yes, exactly. In the world we are living, the rule of writing ‘Delete’ onto our arms, or even onto our body will not make us disappear. However...”

Kujou had a smile, but now he had a darker expression.

“If your consciousness goes into the world called the computer, what will happen?”

The tone of his voice became lower and more serious than the light tone before.

“Eh?... No. I... Don’t understand what you are talking about...”

Overwhelmed by the atmosphere that suddenly changed, Yumiko’s mind was confused.

“I understand. Then please imagine this. There is a futuristic game. The game is connected to the online world, and the characters are living and adventuring in that world. The most noticeable feature of that game is that it teleports the people living in the real world to experience reality in the game world. This is how the game seems like.”

“It sounds like it’s from movies and science fictions. It’s interesting, but what about it?”

Compared to Yumiko’s facial expression that was mixed with interest and questions, Kujou was more careful as he continued the conversation.

“Please imagine a little bit more. You are now a resident of that game world. You are, so to speak, in the programmed world named game. Then, if I write ‘Delete’ on to you in that world... And ‘Delete’ was coded in the game... What will happen to you?”

Yumiko’s face became more stiffen when she understood what Kujou was trying to say.

“Because... It is different from the reality... If that’s the rule of that world... According to it...”

She swallowed her saliva.

“... I will... Disappear...”

He responded with a smile, looking like a tutor who had received a satisfying

answer from his student.

Kujou finished jumping and poured the fair colored Nilgiri tea into the cup.

Yumiko's brain was tired from the lesson, so she filled her mouth with a fruit tart.

“Different worlds have different rules and so do the words that contain the ability to exorcise. I think if you can understand these, you will naturally understand the phenomenon of ‘exorcising.’”

After saying that, Kujou looked like he was trying to check the taste of the black tea he brewed, so he put the teacup next to his mouth.

Yumiko looked at the clock in the reception office suddenly. It was about fourteen o'clock.

“Then...”

When she turned her attention back to that voice, Kujou placed the teacup down and said with his arms crossed.

“Let's begin your purification.”

1. Chimimouryou – a Japanese phrase describing different kinds of youkai. Chimi – youkai from the mountains. Mouryou – youkai from the rivers, it also has the meaning of intangible and uncertain.↵

2. Youkai – a class of supernatural monsters and spirits in Japanese folklore.↵

3. Betobeto-san – a type of Japanese youkai which is believed to follow after people who walk at night. Betobeto – sticky, or the sound of footsteps.↵

4. Makurakaeshi – a kind of Japanese youkai which continuously flips pillows at night. Since they appear as children, they are considered as zashikiwarashi.↵

5. Hidarugami – a kind of Japanese youkai which makes the people possessed by it. It is on a higher level than most youkai. Gami – kami, god.↵

6. Azukiarai – a kind of Japanese youkai which washes red beans.↵

7. Hatsudai – located in Shibuya District, Tokyo.↵

8. Jumping – the process of using the principle of the convection of water to cause the movement of tea leaves, which requires skills, instead of the momentum of pouring water

into the teapot. It brings out not only the taste of black tea, but also the tannin and caffeine, which are the main components of black tea.↩

4

Kujou slowly stood up and took a beautiful box from the desk, on which books, documents, and so on were placed with one hand and handed it to Yumiko.

“What’s this? It looks like a wooden box.”

It was a wooden box that could be covered by two hands. Upon close examination, each side was decorated with detailed geometric patterns.

“It’s called the secret box¹. It is one of the traditional crafts in Japan that was composed of the technique of marquetry. Since it is called a secret box, it requires some techniques to open it. Oh, there is something wonderful placed inside, so please open it.”

While speaking, Kujou took out his phone from his pocket and began a call.

It was probably her first time seeing a secret box. She curiously turned the wooden box around and around, trying to find the opening.

“What happened, Kujou~ The cakes are ready to serve right now. Why are you calling me at this moment. Ah! What!? As I thought, you want to eat the cake too, right!?”

A happy voice leaked out from Kujou’s phone. This voice caused Kujou to pull a long face.

“Shut up, kid. I don’t need cakes. How is Miss Yui?”

“Um? She’s having a piece of chiffon cake with blueberry sauce intently right in front of me.”

“Oh, then it’s fine. Kid, you have work to do. Get out of the store and start an investigation right now.”

“What!? Are you an idiot!? I just said it’s the time that the cakes are ready to

be served! I haven't had a single bite yet!!"

Akira was intensely countering Kujou, who wanted to ruin the date. However, Kujou was always calm.

"By the way, that day is coming."

"Wh, why are you suddenly saying that!? That day?"

"A few days ago, Miss Yui said she wanted me to teach her how to make chocolate... Chocolate... Speaking of making chocolate during winter², maybe even an idiot like you can get what it meant."

"Wait!? Eh!? That, is that!!...Va, Va, Va, Valenti..."

The sound of swallowing was able to be heard from the other side of the speaker.

"But. I don't know who she's giving the chocolate to. Kid, are you okay with that?."

Kujou's laughter leaked out.

"Are... You... Kidding me..."

Someone besides him.

Thinking about this possibility. Akira became speechless.

"Do you mind? I'm asking you to investigate for the client. Isn't it nice to show Miss Yui that you are capable? I'm giving you a cha~nce!"

"I'll do it!!"

It was an immediate reply.

"I see! That's great. Then show Miss Yui your capabilities."

"Yeah!!"

Kujou's mouth distorted to the shape of a bow even more. He showed a guts pose³ with the smile of a devil.

Sadly, Akira did not have any chance to know it.

"Are you still in Hatsudai⁴?"

“Yeah. I was talking to Yui about it before, and then we decided to eat around all of Hatsudai today.”

“I see. That’s nice. Then start inquiring if there are witnesses of betobeto-san, suspicious people, or something like that immediately.”

“Eh?... I get suspicious people, but betobeto-san... Are you talking about the betobeto-san that appears at the night?”

“Right.”

“Well. I can ask about suspicious people normally... But youkai... How am I supposed to do that?”

Akira’s powerless voice with apparent worries was transmitted to Kujou through the speaker.

“As you know, betobeto-san is a kind of youkai that chase after people at night. There is a high possibility of it sauntering on the streets. People who live there or pass there for work or school may witness it. Just go ask them for now”

“‘Just go ask...’ Well, that’s the only thing I can do... Okay!! I got it. I well try!!”

“Um. I’m counting on you. And ask police about the suspicious people. We should be able to get correct information from them.”

“Got it~”

The conversation ended there.

Immediately after that.

There were a sound of a hard object falling onto the ground. Kujou turned his head to Yumiko.

“You don’t believe me at all!! It’s enough to inquire about betobeto-san only!”

Yumiko was suddenly infuriated, but Kujou acted like nothing had happened, gently sitting onto the sofa and finishing the black tea.

Yumiko stared at Kujou with heavy breathing.

However, Kujou just ignored her.

“... The secret box. Oh ? Have you opened it?”

Still indignant, Yumiko looked at the wood box that was thrown onto the floor.

“What is this!? What do you mean by ‘Open it!’ There isn’t a single opening or a keyhole! It is just a cuboid box. How am I supposed to open it!! Are you making fun of me!!”

Kujou gently picked up the box, which was thrown by Yumiko, that was rolling on the ground desolately.

“Many phenomena in this world are caused by multiple factors. If you only focus on what you see, you may lose the basics of matters. ”

Saying that, Kujou put his fingers on the four sides of the wooden box and started to solve it slowly.

Eventually, he found something strange.

“I see. It’s right here.”

Kujou used his fingers to push a small part of a side horizontally.

Thereupon, part of the beautifully arranged geometric patterns slightly moved to the right.

Yumiko’s eyes popped out.

“... What... Happened?”

“I said it at first, that some techniques are required in order to open this wooden box. As you see, this is simply a puzzle box.”

Smiling, Kujou handed the wooden box with its first lock opened to Yumiko.

Her eyes, which were still filled with anger, were focused on the box.

“This box is arranged in a way that several locks are required to be unlocked before you can get to the innermost part. The first lock that you said was impossible to open was now opened. The second one. Please try it.”

Unable to reject, Yumiko moved her hands slightly.

She tried to push the upper part to the right, the large sides to the right, and

the opposite small sides to the right just as what Kujou had done.

However, the wooden box continued keeping the secret stubbornly.

Holding the immobile box, Yumiko's hands gradually began to shiver, and her breath became rough.

"What is this... I can't do it! Impossible!!"

While speaking, she knocked the table with the wooden box this time.

Kujou breathed out lightly, gently looked at her trembling due to the anger, and softly picked up the box, which was thrown away again.

"Unable to complete what you are doing for the first time is natural. Hitting the wall is also natural. But things will change according to what you think and what you decide to do."

When Kujou took the box, he observed the right part that he had moved before. Same as before, he put his fingers on the four sides.

Probably because he had found something strange, he pushed hard with his fingers under the right part he had moved before.

The geometric patterns moved to the left this time.

"Although they had been moved to the right once, it didn't mean they can not be moved to the right."

Although Yumiko's breath was still rough, she was slightly attracted by the brilliant movement of Kujou's hand.

She fixed her breathing and received the box from Kujou. She pushed the side on which the third lock was supposed to be, and then the upper and lower part to the right and to the left respectively.

Kujou smiled while watching her.

When the warm Nilgiri tea was completely cooled down, a call from Akira caused the vibration in Kujou's inside pocket.

"Hello, Kujou? This is me."

"Which 'Me?' It sounds like a call from a fraud. Do it again. "

While saying so, Kujou slowly ended the call.

Right after that.

As if it was expressing the feeling of the caller, the phone vibrated intensively.

Kujou accepted the call thinking, “Oh, well.”

“So Akira. You are calling me so early. What about the inquiry? ”

“Didn’t you know it was me!!”

Akira shouted his anger out from over the speaker.

“Just so you know, I’m telling you that I’m not inquiring for your sake! I wanted to show Yui that I am a man who is capable of working so desperately. That’s why I’m working hard!! I ran over and over to ask people.”

“Then keep asking until you become barefoot. So what is the result of the inquiry? If you can’t even give me a satisfying report, you are not qualified for the case of the chocolate..”

“Ah... Damn it...”

Recalling the case regarding chocolate, Akira started to talk about the results of the investigation obediently.

“I went into stores starting from the very beginning on the street and inquired, but there weren’t any witnesses regarding betobeto-san. Then I asked the people walking on the streets and kids playing in the park; however, they said they knew nothing about that kind of youkai.”

“What about the suspicious people?”

“U~m, I asked about that as well, but no results. Although I went to the police station near the New National Theatre, the police said they heard nothing about anyone seeing suspicious people in one month. Oh, but they said there was a missing person.”

“... Hum? The police said that?”

“Right. The police at the police station near the theatre said that.”

Kujou closed his eyes as if he was thinking about something, but then quickly opened them again.

“I see. So where are you right now?”

“Near the New National Theatre. Yui said she wanted to buy the famous cookie sandwich that people always line up for at the store. We are on the way to the store.”

“Then besides the case about betobeto-san, also inquire about makurakaeshi, hidarugami, and azukiarai while you go there.”

“What!? Isn’t that too much? Or you want me to ask about other youkai because there is no evidence on betobeto-san’s existence?”

“Complaints are not accepted. Shut up and show Miss Yui your capabilities.”

“O, oh.”

Hearing Akira’s reply, Kujou put his phone into his pocket.

“Where are they right now?”

Unable to open the third lock, Yumiko asked without moving her eyes away from the secret box.

“It seems like they want to buy a cookie sandwich which is so popular that people always line up for, so they are moving forward to the shop.”

“Sucre Ciel in Hatsudai!! That’s my favorite store!! Its Custard and Fresh Cream Cookie Sandwich is really delicious!! To the extent that I want to eat it every day!!”

She must be very fond of the cookie sandwiches. All the attention she put onto the box was interceded by this conversation.

“Really? Then I will ask him to buy one for you if he calls me again.”

“Ah, no, I didn’t mean that...”

Slightly embarrassed, Yumiko started to find the lock of the box like she had been doing at the beginning.

“It’s fine. Anyways, the one who is going to buy it is the kid who does all the odd jobs, so there is no need to be concerned about him. By the way, how was the box? Are you able to solve the third lock?”

Saying that, Kujou took out the phone that he had put away earlier, launched

Messages and sent a message.

“U~m,” after being troubled for a while, she opened her mouth with her eyes on the box.

“I tried what you had done to use fingers to search on the sides, then I found a weird, thin protrusion. I tried every mean, but it wouldn’t move. It has nothing to do with force, right?”

“No. It has nothing to do with force.”

She, who had thrown a tantrum about the box, started to have a conversation about the box.

Kujou was satisfied and stretched out his hand gently.

“Both right and left did not work. Then how about this: try to broaden your horizons this time.”

“Horizons?”

The response vague, her eyes and fingers were searching and moving around the box frantically.

The next second, a thrill sound of a piece of metal disrupted her attention from the box.

This sudden accident attracted Yumiko’s attention to Kujou.

“Oh. I apologize. How can I make a mistake like dropping a spoon onto the ground?”

As she looked down, she saw a teaspoon shaking slightly on the ground.

“Excuse me. Can you pretend the side with irregular protrusions on its left and right sides to be the front?”

She turned the box around as she was told by Kujou in order to find that side.

“But this side was already moved, so I don’t think there will be anything.”

“Right, if you only look at the point and the line. So this time, let’s focus on things on a surface. Please think about surfaces instead of parts.”

Yumiko though for a while after Kujou’s reply, she put force onto the whole

surfaces of the small sides. Next, she turned to the top, put force onto both the left and the right, and the bottom at last.

“Click!” With a pleasant sound, the small sides moved downwards as a whole.

“Yes—!!”

Kujou smiled silently at Yumiko, whose face beamed with a smile for the first time after she came to this house.

“Until now, you were focusing on sides such as a part of a large side, a part of a small side, instead of the surface. It is great to focus on a certain part; however, when you are stuck, it is important to relax. Oh, I realized that I forgot to tell you... It was the case regarding betobeto-san, that nothing could prove its existence on the streets according to Akira’s inquiry.”

“Oh... I see... ”

Her expression was slightly clouded.

“However, since I’ve asked him to inquire about other youkai as well after that, please wait here for a while. Plus, the locks of the secret box are almost opened, please continue.”

As if she was answering Kujou’s encouragement, Yumiko nodded earnestly.

Immediately after that, there was a call coming from Akira.

“Ah, is that Kujou? This is me... Akira.”

“Hum. You seem to have the ability to learn. Then? Isn’t it too fast for you to inquire?”

“No!! Yui became sulky!”

“What!?”

Kujou, whose face was calm until now, transformed into the look of Bishamonten⁵.

“You little kid! What had you done to Miss Yui! Did she meet a suspicious person, was sexually harassed, or kidnapped!? Or don’t tell me that she was punched!! You devil, you beast, I won’t forgive you!! Tell me your location. I’m going to get you immediately!!”

The image of Kujou yelling and gashing his lip in wrath without wiping the blood appeared in Akira's head, so he explained immediately.

"Wait! You misunderstood! How could I do that!! Calm down!... When we were walking towards to the cookie sandwich shop, I inquired in between for a few times. So when we arrived, there was a super long line waiting in front of the store... We hurried and lined up. Then there was an old woman standing before us. Since she said, 'I brought a smartphone for the first time, but I do not know how to use it except for the camera,' so I helped her extremely~ courteously... But then... But then! That woman said, 'Give me all the cookie sandwich,' and she bought like ten of them!! So they were sold out, sold out!! Then Yui said, 'If Akira wasn't inquiring, then we were able to buy it!' She became angry and sulky... "

"Oh. Then good luck."

Saying that, Kujou ended the call one-sidedly.

Soon, the phone vibrated as always.

Clicking his tongue, Kujou decided to answer the call.

"How could you end the call that arbitrarily! In the first place, it was your fault causing her to become sulky!!"

Kujou sighed once at Akira, who kept talking on and on.

"Listen to me, Akira. Men who can work while caring for women are considered capable, which means that they will be sought after. In the first place, the madam asking for all the cookie sandwiches marked your failure. I can't do anything with it. However, if you can calm down the depressed heart of a lady, you points will probably increase even more."

"So you want me to comfort her?"

"Admit your fault, and take her to the next store casually."

"No. I don't even know that kind of stores."

"There should be an elementary school near you. Right beside it, there is a dessert store which sells fruit galette. At there, even Miss Yui will return to a good mood."

“Really!? Thank you, Kujou!!”

“Umm, listen to me. Admit your fault first.”

“Yeah! It’s easy!!”

“Ah~ Oh, Akira. Don’t forget about what I’ve talked about in the message.”

“No problem no problem! I asked the old woman and some couples at the shore when we were lining up. I will text you later.”

“Okay. I’m counting on you. Ah, I’ll send you another message later. Execute it.”

Akira’s voice became more cheerful since he had received the method to comfort Yui from Kujou.

However, Kujou’s mouth distorted to the shape of a bow even more.

Akira wasn’t aware of it.

The true intention of the strategy Kujou bestowed on him.

He wanted Akira to admit that it wasn’t anyone’s order but his own mistake that made Yui unpleasant.

Laughter leaked out from Kujou’s mouth as he was satisfied with his method of inducing Akira to admit his fault.

Yumiko watched this butler laughing out loud while texting in wonder.

1. Click [here](#) to view a picture of some secret boxes.↵
2. Chocolate during winter – in Japan, girls usually make chocolate for the Valentine’s Day. They sometimes confess to the people they like with a bag of handmade chocolate.↵
3. Guts pose – an English word made up by Japanese. It is similar to a fist pump.↵
4. Hatsudai – located in Shibuya District, Tokyo.↵
5. Bishamonten – a Buddha God who has an angry-looking face.↵

Vivid, shiny red was poured into glossy, white teacups. Contrary to the nigiri tea from before, the candy tea was mild.

Yumiko's face beamed with the most beautiful smile since she had come to this house. She drank the hot black tea with a satisfied expression.

The secret box placed in front of her was no longer a perfect geometric shape of a cuboid after several locks being unlocked, but turned out to be a complex, irregular shape.

According to Kujou, there was only one lock left.

However, the last lock could not be opened by normal means. All the techniques that had been used would not work.

After multiple incorrect trials, Yumiko's endeavors were in vain, and she still could not open the last lock.

"I see... Maybe you are not able to open this lock right now, but you will definitely be able to do so when the time comes. Please do not give up until the last moment."

Although Yumiko was already satisfied for being able to solve the secret box to this extent, she tried to control her thoughts at Kujou's words, and decided to wait for when "the time" would be while taking a breath.

"What is your opinion on youkai?"

She was about to place the teacup back to the table, but when hearing that sudden question, her hand stopped.

"Yo, youkai? I think... They are not all bad. But they are something terrible which will harm humans. That's why I'm in such a bad situation right now... Kujou, you are a detective who handles occult cases, right? So, of course, you believe in the existence of youkai? "

Being asked, Kujou placed the teapot onto the table, and slowly opened his mouth.

“Yes. I believe. There are many youkai existing in Japan since a long time ago; however, I think they have changed a lot.”

She tilted her head because she did not understand what Kujou had just said.

Although Kujou realized it, his phone received a message before he could explain in detail.

“Excuse me.”

While speaking, Kujou checked his messages quickly.

Then he knitted his brows at the end of the message.

“... I see...”

“What happened?”

Tightening his expression, Kujou told her.

“All the mysteries had been solved. ”

Yumiko caught her breath slightly at the word “mysteries.”

Her tiny change could not escape from Kujou’s acute discernment.

“Please don’t worry. It is possible to find your disappeared mother. And at the same time, I will exorcise the youkai that possess you.”

“Eh!? Really!?”

“Yes. I will solve all your requests.”

Kujou smiled after speaking.

Then he answered the call from Akira.

“Hey, kid. How are you?”

“What!? What do you mean by ‘How are you?’ Idiot!!”

Yumiko showed a wry smile at the usual loud voice leaking out from the speaker.

“It sounds like you are fine. That’s better than anything.”

“I am really tired!! I was investigating all the time after that. Although I went

to the dessert stores with Yui, I haven't had a single bite of anything!!"

"Is miss Yui satisfied?"

Akira breathed out and answered with his powerless voice.

"... Extremely satisfied..."

"Oh. Then that's enough."

Kujou's voice was noticeably cheerful.

"By the way, where are you guys right now?"

"We are going back. Almost arrived at the agency"

"I got it. Then, is that case alright?"

"Yeah. I did the exact same as the second message instructed, and the worker in the cookie sandwich store told me everything when I asked them. She is really a regular customer. Wow~ Your inference is so awesome..."

As if he was not pleased at all for being praised by the kid, Kujou ended the call.

"The kid who does all the odd jobs and went out will be back soon. Before that, let's talk about the all the youkai who possess you."

After speaking, he used the candy tea to wet his lips slightly.

"So let's go straight into the conclusion. There aren't any witnesses regarding betobeto-san, makurakaeshi, or other youkai you had talked about."

"Really..."

Bowing her head down, Yumiko's expression was clouded.

"The witnesses of the youkai and spirits became rumors in one way or another. Usually, the information is exchanged through the Internet. However, it doesn't apply to this case at all... I'm thinking that if you are targeted by someone. "

Her face showed an expression of "Eh!?"

"I am... targeted...?"

"Yes. That's correct. Ah, oh. Can I ask you a crazy question?"

“What is it?”

“Do you understand the difference between spirits and youkai?”

It was something that did not seem to be related to the topic.

She was taken aback by the question, but shook her head after thinking for a while.

Looking at Yumiko, Kujou took in a large breath and formed his language slowly,

“Spirits are something unclear, while youkai are a ghastly phenomena that people are able to share the same experience.”

“O... Oh.”

Received an ambiguous reply, Kujou the tutor started to explain it detailedly.

“Youkai like betobeto-san and makurakaeshi are phenomena that happen right by your side. You will hear the footsteps, your pillow will be moved, your body will feel tired, and you will hear that sound. You have actually experienced all of these, correct?”

“Yes. That’s why they became my stress.”

“In fact, you are experiencing the grotesque phenomena. However, they are not shared with others. If they are phenomena caused by youkai, there is a doubtful point. Then something came to mind. Someone is following you.”

“Eh!? Do you mean a stalker!?”

“Right.”

Yumiko’s face stiffed because of Kujou’s serious expression. She now understood the meaning of she was “targeted by someone.”

Realizing something, her trembling voice leaked out.

“Wait, wait... A second... The place I saw the youkai was... In my ... House... Which means, that guy... Was able get in and out my home freely... ”

Imaging about a chain of events, she could feel the cold sweat coming out from her palms. She desperately wiped the sweat off.

Observing her for a while, Kujou breathed out and softened his face expression.

“I apologize. I scared you. Please calm down. There isn’t anyone stalking you. According to the person who does all the odd things, there are no witnesses of suspicious people on the streets, and the police in charge of that region did not hear anything about it either.”

Yumiko’s mind was instantly relieved.

“Plus, from what you had said, you rarely go out, so you don’t seem to have much contact with others. Under that circumstance, it is difficult to imagine who is targeting you; however, if that’s the case...”

Kujou placed his index finger in front of his lips and spoke after a few seconds of thinking.

“... There is still a mystery left... Who caused the phenomena you experienced at home? What is the being that made you feel stressful and unfortunate?”

However, contrary to the speaking, Kujou looked straight into Yumiko’s eyes.

Speechless...

Being stared at by Kujou’s eyes, which could see through everything, Yumiko could not move.

And then she felt she was sweating cold sweat.

6

“I’m back~”

The unbroken silence that felt like thirty minutes or an hour was broken by Akira’s bubbly voice.

Hearing that voice, Yumiko took in a deep breath.

Perhaps the pressure from Kujou made her forget to breathe.

The pleasant voice of Yui, who had enjoyed having desserts freely for a whole day, and the disappointed voice from Akira, who hadn't had a single bite of the desserts even at the end, were approaching the reception office.

With the pleasant sound of the door knob being turned, they two entered the room.

"Welcome back, Miss Yui."

Kujou stood up and made a deep bow, receiving the duffle coat and the casquette from Yui and hung them onto the nordic-style wooden hanger stand.

"Kujou~ Please take mine~ Too."

Akira showed Kujou his tired face from walking around all day investigating by himself, and gave out his blouson.

"The trash bin is over in that corner."

"This is not a trash—!!"

He seemed to have the energy to tsukkomu¹.

After introducing the client to them, they drank the newly brewed darjeeling tea by Kujou in order to warm their bodies while listening to the details of the case.

"I see. The kamikakushi of your mother and the mischief of youkai."

Contrary to her appearance of a girl, Yui spoke like she had understood life. She reached for the special strawberry roll cake.

Although she was eating desserts twenty-four seven, it seemed like they all went into another stomach of her. Only she knew which would be considered the main course and which would be considered as desserts.

Glancing at her sideways, Akira talked to himself while reaching his hand to the Darjeeling tea.

Because, of course, nothing was placed in front of him except for the black tea.

“I’m sorry, Yumiko. We were interrupted in the middle of our conversation, right? Let’s return to our topic immediately.”

She felt the gentle care from Kujou, and nodded with slight hesitation.

“So we had talked about that in order for the phenomena to be called youkai, one must share the same experience with another. However, it seemed like only you had experienced the phenomena that occurred around your side. And there is no information about any suspicious people who followed you.”

Kujou took up the secret box, which had an irregular shape because almost all the locks had been opened, and continued talking.

“The first youkai you saw was betobeto-san, correct?”

“Correct.”

“The youkai betobeto-san is a phenomenon of having the feeling of being followed by someone when walking at night. Long story short, it refers to hearing footsteps... You had probably heard the footsteps approaching your room at night. And it continued for days. However, knowing the truth, you just didn’t want to reply.”

Hearing that, Yumiko opened her eyes wide.

“Then day after day, it turned out to be your stress, and it became hard for you to fall asleep. Of course, your sleeping became more shallow. You wanted to sleep so desperately, but you couldn’t. When you slept, you would worry about something unnecessary. That was the second youkai that appeared, makurakaeshi.”

Yumiko’s breath started to be a little rough while Kujou stared at her.

“The third youkai that appeared was hidarugami². Even though this youkai was named a god, it does mischief, such as the phenomenon of people gaining weight suddenly and unable to move in the mountains... Day after day, your stress and lack of sleep caused the significant consumption of your energy, and you became unable to move anymore. ”

Kujou was turning around with the irregular box in his hands.

“However... You said that no one gave you a hand, right?”

... There was no response.

Although Yumiko’s eyes were looking at Kujou, they were vacant as if they were looking at somewhere far away.

Kujou murmured in loneliness and continued the conversation.

“... After a while... You did not have any energy after the repeated stress and realized something when you were in your bed. ”

“I see. That’s why I could not perceive the existence of kamikakushi and youkai.”

“Exactly right. Miss Yui ”

“Eh!? What’s going on?”

Kujou took a deep breath and spoke out with exceptionally serious eyes.

“Yumiko, you wanted to escape. To escape from the reality that no one would help you or care about you. So then you made up that everything was done by youkai. You said that everything was youkai’s faults. And at last, you made up the chain of uproar, pretending your mother had experienced kamikakushi.”

Trembling while breathing, she chose the path of escaping from Kujou’s words unconsciously.

“... Please listen to me... Please listen to me... Kamikakushi... Actually happened... Youkai... Actually existed... Please listen to me.”

She murmured with her vacant eyes, and she was heard by the three silently.

“Excuse me.”

A lively and clear voice came from the entrance.

The color of consciousness returned to the eyes of Yumiko, who repeated the process of self-justification vacantly.

“Oh! She was here.”

While speaking, Akira walked to the entrance hall and came to the reception office with a middle-aged woman after a while.

Her age was around forty. Her semi-long, well-trimmed hair was glossy, and the cleanliness of her makeup and jacket left people with the impression of a woman who can work at their first glance.

“... Wh, why are you... Here.”

Seeing the woman coming into the room, Yumiko stood up and a voice mixing of astonishment and wrath leaked out.

“Yumiko!!”

Contrary to Yumiko’s voice, the woman who had a box in her hands that read “Sucre Ciel in Hatsudai, the Cookie Sandwich Specialty Shop” spoke with a happy voice.

“I apologize for not introducing myself at first. I work at Hakoniwa Detective Agency and my name is Koushirou Kujou. Are you Mrs. Harue Kinoshita, the mother of Yumiko Kinoshita?”

“Y... Yes. Correct.”

Unable to understand the circumstance, Harue replied with confusion. In order to hear about the case, she was prompted by Kujou to sit by Yumiko.

Kujou slowly sat onto the sofa.

Four people, including Yui and Akira, were looking at Kujou.

A piece of firewood crackled in the fireplace, which warmed up the atmosphere of winter.

After a moment of silence, Kujou spoke to Yumiko.

“I brought your mother, who had experienced kamikakushi, here.”

“Eh...” Harue reacted with a faint voice that was so quiet that you might miss

it without paying close attention.

“When Kujou sent me the message, I was really surprised. ‘Find a missing person instead of the witnesses regarding youkai! And keep it secret.’”

“However, it was unexpectedly easy to find her, right?”

“Yeah. I investigated detailedly as the second email instructed, and I found her immediately. But I’ve never thought about the person lining up in front of us at the cookie sandwich store was actually her.”

This armchair detective³ was looking at Yumiko, who did not speak one word, as if he had already known everything from the very beginning.

“You said that you love cookie sandwiches to the extent that you wanted to eat it every day. When I hear that I realized that your mother must visit the store very frequently, especially within this month.”

Akira did not understand Kujou’s way of speaking. Although he acted like there was a question mark above his head, Kujou ignored him and faced Yumiko with a smile.

“Mrs. Harue hadn’t experienced kamikakushi. I think she goes to work every day as usual. From her outfit, she seemed to come here from the middle of her work. Probably she came here during her lunch break in order to meet with Akira and Yui.”

“Eh? Wait a second. Then the missing person the police talked about wasn’t Mrs. Harue!?”

“Yeah. That’s right.”

Staring at her, who remained silent and hadn’t spoken a word for a while, Kujou said.

“Yumiko, you were the missing person.”

1. Tsukkomu – making an immediate response to ridicule or question another person.[↵](#)
2. Hidarugami – the “gami” part has the same meaning of kami, which is god.[↵](#)
3. Armchair detective – a detective who does not personally visit a crime scene but is able to solve the case.[↵](#)

7

Although Yumiko's facial expression could not be seen because she was looking down, they could tell that she was gripping her hands very hard.

"Since Mrs. Harue had to raise you all by herself, she probably put all her effort into her work. She showed her abilities and finally she could be in her position right now. Everything she did was to not make you suffer. However, although your home became richer, your heart became more distressed. When you came back from school, you didn't even have a person to say 'I'm home' to. You didn't even have a person to talk to. You ate your meals alone. Since you were a child, you turned the thirst of your heart into anger towards Mrs. Harue unconsciously. Then the darkness in your heart exceeded the limit and leaked out. You wanted to trouble your mother, so you made up the stories of kamikakushi and youkai. "

Yumiko trembled and breathe roughly while facing down, because the deepest part of her heart was exposed to Kujou.

Looking from the corners of his eyes , Akira understood Kujou's words.

"So the case regarding the missing person was basically... Leaving home."

"Right."

The next moment, the tea set on the table trembled violently with the sound of a fist hitting onto the table.

"No, no, no!! I did not leave my home!!"

Standing up, Yumiko gabled on and on at Kujou.

"I really saw zashikiwarashi, and betobeto-san, makurakaeshi, hidarugami, and azukiarai really existed!! I saw them. I am not lying!! And that person! That person had really experienced kamikakushi and disappeared from home!!"

While speaking, she pointed at Harue and glared at her.

"... It was... It was!... It was all your fault!! Coming here that shamelessly, who

do you think you are!? It's too late!! It's better for you to do your boring work every day, every day, every day, every day, or for your whole life!!... Why did you!... Why! Why did you give birth to me!!”

Shouting intensely, Yumiko could not calm down from her anger and her body was trembling.

However, there was one person who was infuriated by her yelling.

“Wait. You... How could you speak to your mom like that... And... You don't even appreciate her for giving birth to you, what are you talking about!! ”

While speaking, Akira stood up, as if he was trying to grab at her.

“You are Kujou... Right?”

A quiet but transparent and distinct voice was sandwiched between the two who had released murderous intent.

It was Harue.

Yumiko and Akira also turned their heads to the voice.

“I, had experienced kamikakushi.”

Harue spoke and her face beamed with a smile.

“Aging is really annoying. I always forget things quickly. Sometimes I even forget where my home is. I have thought about going to see the doctor, but I'm busy with my work.”

She laughed with slight embarrassment.

“What?... W, wait a second. What are you saying, Mrs. Harue!?”

Akira was so perturbed by Harue's words that he even forgot about his wrath towards Yumiko's outrageous words and actions.

“Mrs. Harue, why are you not angry! Your daughter is being insane!? How much trouble has she made for you?”

Kujou suppressed Akira, who tried to cross-examine Harue, and spoke with a

voice that only Akira could hear as if he wanted to adjust the atmosphere.

“Mothers are... Venerable.”

While saying, he looked at Harue and smiled.

“... What... Are you talking about... Why...”

Yumiko, the person who blamed the youkai for everything and made up the story that her mom had experienced kamikakushi, was confused by Harue’s words even more than Akira was.

Slightly looking downwards, Harue stood up. Her expression could not be seen through her hair that covered her face.

Then she gently hugged Yumiko, who was standing still next to her.

“... I apologize... I didn’t notice Yumiko’s thoughts... Until now.”

Warm drops dripped across Harue’s cheeks incessantly.

“I didn’t want you to suffer... I wanted you to enter a high school and a college, find a job and do something you are passionate about, and live freely... In order to reach that goal... It’s okay for me to work hard...”

Harue’s voice was gradually muffled by tears. Hugged by her mother, Yumiko listened without saying a single word.

“Recently... I finished the project that I had been working on for a long time. So I was finally able to talk with you leisurely. I was thinking that we could finally do something together as a family... Then I... This time... I didn’t even know... What to talk about to you...”

“... M... Mom.”

Yumiko murmured with her lips soundlessly.

Then she awkwardly hugged her mother, who spoke while sobbing, with confusion.

“By the time I noticed... We live in the same house, yet you are so far away from me. The door of your room... Even a single door... Right now, I... Could not open it... I am... I am... sorry, Yumiko...”

Hearing that, Yumiko looked up with her eyes wet.

“That’s what happened. The youkai betobeto-san was actually your mother, Mrs. Harue.”

Kujou enveloped the mother and daughter with his unusually gentle voice.

“Mrs. Harue really wanted to abridge the distance between you two; however, the gap formed over a long period of time was extraordinarily deep. She did not even know how to deal with it.”

Yui and Akira listened to him silently.

“However, Mrs. Harue kept her chin up. Her positive way of thinking was probably trained by her work. ‘What are the topics among the college students? What are they passionate about? What are they playing with?’ Then Mrs. Harue discovered something she was able to do. It was the smartphone. Since Mrs. Harue seems to be burned out by work, she probably uses a computer to send mails. I think she used a Galapagos cell phone. She doesn’t need the functions that are unnecessary for work. Then she purchased her first smartphone in her life in order to have a common topic with Yumiko... However... Sadly, the current smartphones are excessively high-tech and have too many difficult-to-use functions, which made it an excessive merchandise for Mrs. Harue, who was a beginner of using a smartphone. However, she discovered a function that she was able to use. It was the camera.”

Kujou stopped for a moment after standing while explaining.

“Yumiko, do you remember? In fact, I haven’t exorcised the youkai azukiarai.”

Kujou slowly stood up and approached the two..

“The sound made by the youkai azukiarai was very characteristic. As you have heard... A sound like... Shakishaki. The sound varies in different regions, Usually, it is expressed as shakishaki or shakashaka. The night when azukiarai appeared in front of your room, you were probably were mentally exhausted and heard the sound as shakishaki. However, wasn’t that really shakashaka?...

Shakashaka... Let’s break it down. Sha, ka, sha, ka, sha, ka, sha, ka¹...”

Yumiko understood what Kujou wanted to say, she widely opened her wet eyes and soon tore out.

“Great. You understood it. Mrs. Harue was thinking and looking at you intently that much. So please answer Mrs. Harue’s heart... It is your turn to try your best.”

Kujou used his gentlest voice today to support Yumiko’s heart and to encourage her.

“... I’m... Sorry... Mom.”

Yumiko was touched by her mother’s true heart, and her voice became so indistinct due to the tears that it was difficult to be heard; however, to Harue, it was enough.

“Yumiko, this was the first time you apologized since you had come to this detective agency. Human beings make mistakes; however, humans have to admit their own mistakes in order to progress. You are probably able to open the last lock of this box now.”

While speaking, Kujou handed the secret box that Yumiko had fought with.

She used her hand to wipe the tears off from her misty eyes. With Harue and Kujou watching, she put a little force onto the last lock that she was unable to unlock.

At that time.

The lid of the irregularly geometric box was distinctly shift to the side and the inner part of the box was exposed under the light.

Being able to complete a task until the end, Yukiko’s hands trembled with joy.

The eyes that started to become misty again discovered a piece of paper in the largely opened box.

The piece of paper she held in her hands was written with calligraphy in ink.

“You tried your best. Congratulations!!”

The words no matter how many times Yumiko had thought about but could

speaking out overflowed from Yumiko. Then they dripped off from her mouth with the momentum of her endless tears.

“Mom... Sorry... I’m really sorry... Mom...”

Harue hugged Yumiko fondly and gently.

1. Sha, ka, sha, ka, sha, ka, sha, ka – The sound of Harue tapping the shutter button of the camera on her smartphone.↩

8

Sunset occurred so early during the winter that it was already completely dark outside. The case was solved peacefully after that and it was now approximately thirty minutes after they saw off the client.

Kujou poured the Assam tea into Yui’s teacup after a perfect jumping¹.

Yui watched joyfully and used her third Custard and Fresh Cream Cookie Sandwich to make her mouth full.

“By the way, I didn’t think that the old woman who bought all the cookie sandwiches right in front of our eyes would become the key to this case. It was a cool coincident.”

“It wasn’t a coincidence. The answer was based on your investigation result from the streets and the outfit of the client.”

“Kujou is also an armchair detective².”

While speaking, Yui blew onto the hot Assam tea.

“Eh? What? Euthanasia³?”

“Oh~ It’s so courageous of you to have a mouth that is seeking a quarrel with me. Kid, don’t think you can die with euthanasia! I will take your nails off one by one and use needles to prick... ”

“Stopppppppp! It’s too painful to even imagine it———!!”

Yui laughed at this farce and softly placed the teacup back.

“This case was slightly weird.”

“Right. Although I knew that this was an ordinary case from the result of Miss Yui’s perceiving the spirits when Miss Yui walked by Yumiko, I hadn’t thought of the possibility that it was her leaving home and planning and acting everything by herself at that time. ”

“Well, but wasn’t it still a difficult case to handle? It was great that you could actually communicate with that kind of people, but it was still very difficult, right?”

Akira’s question triggered Kujou’s memory of his conversation with Yumiko.

“When Yumiko first came to this house, our conversation began with her denying all my opinions unsparingly.”

“Wow... That was harsh...”

“She was probably afraid of being denied, so she did not even want to admit that she was wrong. That’s why I agreed with her at first, then accepted her, and I was able to communicate with her in the same world.”

“U~mm. That’s referring to what you had told us about ‘the conversation of Delete’ and ‘the meaning of to exorcise?’”

“If the person I am talking to is not in the same world as me, then it’s better to be in the same as that person.”

“I feel like it is more similar to counseling than exorcising.”

“Well, kind of. Knowing a person’s world, and communicating with them at the same position as them... It’s the purification of the heart. Well, this time, this secret box had played a significant role. ”

While speaking, Kujou turned the wooden box, whose lid was opened, around and around in his hands.

“Oh! That coincidence was so cool!! When she opened the lid, a piece of paper with ‘Congratulations’ came out!!”

Kujou sighed once.

“That’s why I said you are stupid. It was me who placed it in that box at the

beginning.”

“Wwwwwwwhat-!?”

Akira yelled with, in a way, his loudest voice of the day.

“The things placed in this house were already been altered. Well, in a nutshell, it’s the same as magic. Most of them were arranged with tricks. Similar to the performance of magic, each of the trick can be used independently. In this case, the secret box is a nice choice.”

Saying that, Kujou sipped the Assam tea and milk.

“Oh! Yeah!! B, by the way, Yui, how was I today?”

“Umm? What do you mean by ‘how?’”

“Well, see. Do you have any thoughts on something like a man who is able to work is capable? A man who apologizes for his fault is capable? A man who had been working and walking all day long is capable?”

Akira was confirming if his working was seen by the person of whom he wanted to be seen by the most. Looking forward to the most satisfying reply he might receive, his eyes were shining.

But Yui closed her eyes and said silently.

“Ah, I see what do you mean. Although I haven’t told you about this, but in the family of Mikami, there is a family rule that ‘Curse a person’s offsprings to thousand years later if you have any resentments regarding desserts.’”

“What!? Wait!! Eeeeeeeeh!?”

Yui’s words spoken with resentment caused Akira to lose his passion suddenly.

“Although I was thinking that it was better for you to jump around the capital freeway like a pinball when we weren’t able to buy a cookie sandwich... I’m able to eat it peacefully right now.”

While speaking, Yui opened her closed eyes and added a sentence with a smile.

“You are capable, Akira.”

As all his fatigue had been already blown away by that smile, Akira’s laughter echoed.

“Oh, well,” Kujou was watching them.

“Hey, Yui. So, so, of course, please get me the chocolate!”

“Umm? Chocolate?... What are you talking about?”

Because of her excessively innocent reply, Akira’s time stopped for a moment.

At that moment, Kujou silently stood up from his seat.

Without even making a faint sound... Secretly.

“What, what are you talking about~ Speaking of chocolate during February, isn’t it about that day? I heard that you will make chocolate yourself and hand it to...”

“I don’t have the intend to make anything.”

She replied without hesitation.

His dream and hope were broken completely by the Yui’s ruthless words. The core of Akira’s heart snapped so easily that his heart fell apart right at the moment.

“No, but! Kujou said!! Hey, Kujou, say something... No!! He’s not hereeeeeeeeeeeeeeeee—!!”

Kujou wasn’t at the direction that Akira turned to. There was only an empty sofa and the Assam tea that was still warm with faint vapor rising up.

“Ku, Ku, Ku, Kujou—!! You damned butler, wait for meeeeeeeeeee!!”

Yelling, Akira dashed to the hallway.

“Even he is Kujou, he probably has to lower his head this time.”

Thinking of this, Yui smiled bitterly.

She drank the Assam tea that was at the most suitable time to drink and spoke with slight embarrassment.

“I won’t make any... But I didn’t say I won’t give you any.”

The firewood was burning silently in the fireplace.

Only the rabbit puppet that was placed on the shelves heard the adorable murmur from its owner.

1. Jumping – the process of using the principle of the convection of water to cause the movement of tea leaves, which requires skills, instead of the momentum of pouring water into the teapot. It brings out not only the taste of black tea, but also the tannin and caffeine, which are the main components of black tea.↵

2. Armchair detective – a detective who does not personally visit a crime scene but is able to solve the case.↵

3. Euthanasia – “euthanasia” shares the first three syllables with “armchair detective” in Japanese.↵

Chapter 3: Under the Cherry Blossom Tree...

1

“Wowwwwwwww, so cool! You can really drink!!”

A man who was in a dark blue denim jacket was pouring Japanese sake into his mouth from a paper cup with momentum.

The surrounding men and women watched him joyfully, clapping their hands enthusiastically.

“Hah!! This sake is so good!! Although the temperature got lower when the night arrived, the sake warmed my body from the inside. Hey, you have to drink it too!!”

The man in the denim jacket offered a dainty lady who had a down jacket draped over her shoulders and sat next to him to have a drink.

“I can’t drink that much.”

Ignoring what the lady had just said, he ruthlessly poured the sake into the cup until it was about to overflow.

“Then I’m gonna drink it~”

Probably because of either the karaoke or sake, the man with a remarkably raucous voice and red face took the paper cup from the lady’s hand and started to pour the sake into his mouth.

Another stylish man with a pair of glasses on him saw that and provoked the man in the denim jacket into drinking boldly. As a response to that, the man with a raucous voice finished the sake in the cup quickly and said,

“Hanamizake¹ is especially delicious.”

“It’s not even hanamizake. You haven’t looked at the flowers even once since we came here at noon.”

A petite girl with blond twintails commented without caring about the difference in their size.

“Ah? Really?”

After saying that, the two laughed passionately.

A wind blew through the space in between the five people.

The cherry blossoms above them were disturbed by the wind and floated down as if they were dancing.

“Cherry blossoms are really beautiful.”

The dainty lady draping a down jacket over her shoulders covered herself from the wind murmured while watching the petals dancing in the air.

“By the way, isn’t it so great that we could find a place right under such a giant cherry blossom tree? It looks like everyone wants to enjoy the blossoms right here.”

“Yeah, yeah! Even people like us, who enrolled in college just for playing, could find this kind of place.”

The lady with blond twintails said nonchalantly and courageously.

“‘For playing’ is really impolite!!”

After saying that, the man pushed his glasses slightly and said elegantly,

“It is for drinking sake boldly as a club.”

“There is no difference!!”

When the man with a raucous voice laughed out loud, the man wearing glasses clapped his hands boldly with a smug face. At that moment, there was a series of conte that his glasses, whose position had just been fixed, slanted again, entertaining everyone there with the momentum from the sake.

“By the way, didn’t you say cherry blossoms were beautiful before?”

The man in a denim jacket started a conversation with the lady in a down jacket.

“I said that, but what about it?”

Different from the moment before, the man lowered his voice and squeezed the words out.

“Cherry blossoms are beautiful... Because... There are corpses buried under the cherry blossom trees.”

The other four stiffened at the bizarre atmosphere created by the man.

“A, are you kidding?”

“No... I’m not kidding. Do you know? Once upon a time, a great literary giant wrote that ‘There are corpses buried under the cherry blossom trees.’ Then, it was spread throughout the world and it became something similar to a rumor or a urban legend. It is said that the more beautiful the cherry blossoms are, the greater the number of corpses buried under the tree.”

Saying that, the man laughed and the other four looked at him silently.

“One day... I found something interesting when I was on Twitter. Then I decided to do that. ”

The man crossed his hands in front of his face and spoke slowly with a mysterious look.

“There are many rumors spreading around the world. This is one of them. It seems like no one knows to whom the place around this cherry blossom tree belongs to since several decades ago. So everyone is allowed to appreciate this gigantic cherry blossom tree; however... There isn’t a single person coming... Do you know the reason?”

The four were so nervous that they made sounds from their throat.

“There is a saying that if there are corpses buried under a cherry blossom tree, the sobbing voice of a woman from a long time ago can be heard every night during the season when the cherry blossoms bloom.”

The five people and the cherry blossoms trembled due to the strong wind.

Everyone was fighting with their fears and listened carefully if the sound coming from the broken branches was the sobbing sound of a woman.

“... Humans are afraid of what they don’t know about...”

The man in the denim jacket murmured quietly but with force.

“Then knowing the truth will solve all the problems! It is now the time for us Mystery Club to ignite our souls!!”

After declaring that in a loud voice, he finished the rest of the Japanese sake inside the one sho bottle².

“W, wait. What are you going to do?”

Feeling the sake permeate his stomach, the man in the denim jacket increased his volume.

“Of course! I want to verify it, with my eyes!! Whether there really are corpses under the cherry blossom tree or not.”

Having said that, the man started to search within his big rucksack, quickly found three metal pieces, and threw them onto the vinyl sheet.

“What are those? Are they the home plates used in baseball?”

“That’s such a stupid question. They are obviously the foldable scoops!!”

“Ah, are you serious!?”

“Why are you so scared? There will be no problem! If we can’t dig out any corpses, this rumor will disappear and people will become happy. If we can dig out corpses, then this case will fit for the best mystery! To our Mystery Club, this will become an anecdote what we can tell our juniors!! Either way, this will be a good thing!!”

“... Yeah... You are probably correct.”

Murmuring, the man picked up a scoop while his eyes were ignited by his curiosity and shining behind his eyeglass lenses even if he knew what the other man had just said was sophistry.

Then another man reached his hand towards a scoop as well and started to assemble it efficiently.

“Wow~ I’m excited! Do your best~!!”

While pouring the cup containing Japanese sake into her own mouth, the girl with twintails cheered for the three men happily. Then the lady sitting right

next to her covered her dainty body up with a down coat and stared at the four whose curiosity could not be stopped.

“Alright, then we’re starting now! Ready, go!!”

With that cheer, the three men stabbed the scoops into the places under the cherry blossom tree simultaneously.

“Hurray, hurray, Mystery Club! Come on, come on, Mystery Club!!”

The cheer, which became more optimistic, was covered up by the dim darkness with only the moonlight and disappeared.

Since there were no houses near this tree, no matter how loud the noise they made, no one would be annoyed.

“By the way, the ground is so hard.”

By the time the giant with a raucous voice had scooped about four or five times, he began to complain.

“You loser!! How can a person with more brawn than brains like you give up in front of a mystery!!”

Saying that, the man dug into the ground with the scoop intently, not even caring about his denim jacket getting dirty.

“Oh... here. I think this place is softer.”

Two men met each other’s eyes.

His voice came from the opposite side of the thick tree trunk of the cherry blossom tree.

They quickly went there and restarted the scooping.

Then contrary to until now, the blade was drawn into the ground smoothly.

“Wow, this is so great! Okay, let’s dig into this place!!”

Their unstoppable curiosity intensified. They speeded up, digging into the ground while yelling ‘Yeah!!’

The cold night wind wiped the men’s sweat away several times.

The women who were drinking sake and intently watching them digging from

a distance seemed to get bored and came close to watch them.

“Hey, what’s happening? Half of your bodies are buried in the ground!?”

Twenty to thirty minutes after they started digging.

Under the cherry blossom tree, there was a large hole that could cover up half of an adult male’s body.

“We’ve been digging for a long time, but nothing came out”

The man said while putting on the dirty denim jacket

“I think it’s time to stop. It is inevitable that the rumor is a lie...”

“Wait a second.”

The man with a raucous voice interrupted.

The scoop seemed be stuck in the ground when it was stabbed into the ground.

“... What is this... It feels different from before...”

Saying that, the giant dug repeatedly with all his force in order to find out what hooked the scoop.

The ground that was scooped out.

The dirt that was swirled up.

And there was...

A soil-colored human hand with five fingers that was dug out.

The passionate curiosity transformed into true fear in an instant. Five screams echoed in the jet black darkness.

1. Hanamizake – drinking sake while enjoying the cherry blossoms. It is a traditional custom in Japan during spring.↵

2. One sho bottle – a glass bottle that contains liquids in Japan. Its volume is about 1,800 mL.↵

“Coming up next, a corpse was discovered in Chichibu, Saitama Prefecture on the early dawn of the third. The Police has confirmed that they have started to inquire several people related to the case of corpse abandonment.”

The warm setting sun gave the feeling of the arrival of spring.

The evening became longer than that of the winter days. The warm sunlight gave the dining room of the detective agency a slightly red hue.

And there was a man focused on the news on TV with his mouth filled with a strawberry jam cookie sandwich.

He was Akira Satou, a high school student who went to Hakoniwa Detective Agency every day.

“Hey, Kujou, isn’t this the case regarding the corpse under the cherry blossom tree?”

“I see. You want to be buried as well? Got it. I’ll bury you with trash in the garden right now.”

“Who’s trash!! I didn’t even say I want to be buried in the first place!!”

The butler named Kujou was in black. He was being invective towards a casual sentence spoken by Akira.

“Even if you bury Akira, he wouldn’t provide any nutrition.”

“What!? Yui, how can you say that as well!”

Yui seemed to be satisfied with Akira’s panicking and laughed lightly in a white one piece with flower shapes.

And then a strong aroma of bergamot came, tickling Akira’s and Yui’s noses.

Finishing jumping¹, Kujou carried the Earl Grey tea that was at its peak time to be drunk.

He poured the black tea into Yui’s teacup, who was the master of this detective agency.

“Regarding the case of corpse abandonment that happened approximately a week ago. Five college students from the Mystery Club came to view the cherry

blossoms. With their drunken momentum, they dug the place around the root of the cherry blossom tree and discovered a woman's cadaver that was partially skeletonized."

Kujou continued pouring the Earl Grey tea into Akira's cup.

"Isn't this that thing? People discussed the rumor of 'There are corpses under the cherry blossom trees!!' so excitedly. In my school, I have classmates who dug under the cherry blossom trees in the schoolyard while saying that and was scolded by the teacher who was in charge of student guidance and counselling... Ah~ However... Why are there corpses buried under the cherry blossom trees?"

Kujou's hands stopped from pouring the tea.

"Are you an idiot?"

"Why are you saying that so suddenly!? I'm not stupid!! "

"I didn't say you were stupid. I said you were an idiot."

Yui looked at the two, who could have a quarrel on anything they were talking about. She moved the cup away from her mouth and placed it back to the table while giving a helping hand to Akira.

"There was a literary giant named Motojirou Kajii from the Taisho to Showa Period. Have you heard about him, Akira? "

"What? Who is he? What had he written?"

"Among Motojirou Kajii's works, there is a novella that begins with a story of 'Dead bodies are buried under the cherry trees.'"

"Eh!? So that's its origin!?"

"Well, although we can say that, this story was only the author's imagination. It was not a true story of a person murdering and burying corpses under a cherry blossom tree. "

"Then, why?"

After finishing pouring the black tea into his own cup, Kujou continued Yui's topic.

"After that, Ango Sakaguchi also used the theme that cherry blossoms are

beautiful but horrible at the same time in his novella 'Under the Blossoming Cherry Trees' and it was spread around the world. However, the similarity between these two works is that neither of them have corpses really buried under the cherry blossom trees. Originally, the Japanese people regarded cherry blossoms as ephemeral and beautiful since a long time ago. That special value and aesthetic the Japanese had, only the phrase 'under the cherry blossom trees' from both works merged together and became something similar to an urban legend. Kid, do you understand now?"

Kujou was explaining continuously since the beginning. He drank the Earl Grey tea.

"That's cool! So there are really corpses buried under the cherry blossom tree!!"

"Buha—" Kujou spurted out all the Earl Grey tea in his mouth and choked.

"What!? Wait, Kujou, that's so dirty!!"

Spurted completely, Akira showed his anger while trying to find a handkerchief or tissue to wipe his dirty face.

"I am sorry. Kid, use this one."

Confused by Kujou admitting his fault genuinely, Akira appreciated him and used the white cloth handed to him by Kujou to wipe his face.

... Extremely stiff...

... The fabric was thick...

... And there was an odor of milk...

"Wait! Isn't this the dust cloth!!"

"It's such a waste to hand you a handkerchief. "

Saying that, Kujou used the handkerchief to wipe his own mouth.

"Stop right there."

Suddenly, an aromatic scent came to Akira's nose.

The scent and her action suddenly appeared, calming down Akira's heart, which was filled with wrath, with one breath.

Yui used her own handkerchief to wipe Akira's face which was tainted by black tea.

Akira became embarrassed at the action.

Looking at Akira, Yui felt embarrassed of her action.

Looking at the naive two right in front of his eyes, Kujou attempted to bite his handkerchief and make it into a dust cloth.

A while after that.

The TV was reporting the criminal images and conjectures about the offender of the case regarding the corpse under the cherry blossom tree as usual. Then the light ringtone of Kujou's phone sounded.

"Hello. This is Kujou."

"Yoo~~ Hi, Kyuu²! Long time no see~"

The energetic and cheerful voice leaking out from the phone was from a male.

"Mr. Gen!? It's been a long time. What makes you call me so suddenly? Oh, I mean, you are always sudden."

"Why~ Why don't you say something like 'I was so lonely~'."

"I am going to end the call if you are drunk. Bye."

Looking at the phone with disdain, Kujou attempted to end the call.

"No, no, no, wait a second! My bad!! It's my fault, so listen to me! There's something good!! Please!!"

There was a conspicuously loud voice leaking out from the speaker. Kujou sighed once and put the phone close to his ear reluctantly.

"So, what happened? By the way, your phone calls have never brought me anything good."

"That's not possible. Well, it's like this! It's not convenient to talk over phone."

I'm going to your place right now."

"What!?"

Although Kujou seldomly revealed his emotions to people besides Akira, he revealed them to the man he called Mr. Gen.

About one second after the announcement of "I am going now," the bell on the entrance of Hakoniwa Detective Agency rang noisily.

1. Jumping – the process of using the principle of the convection of water to cause the movement of tea leaves, which requires skills, instead of the momentum of pouring water into the teapot. It brings out not only the taste of black tea, but also the tannin and caffeine, which are the main components of black tea.↵

2. Kyuu – Kujou's nickname. In Japanese, the Kanji of ku also has the pronunciation of kyuu.↵

3

"I won't say '... Really... Don't come.' If you are coming, I'd like you to make an appointment earlier indicating that you are coming."

While saying that, Kujou poured the Darjeeling tea for the new guest.

A man who was seated deeply into a chair in the dining room with widely opened legs ignored what Kujou said and started talking affably.

"By the way, Yui-chan, do you feel better now?"

"Oh. It's been awhile since the cases of Goryuu Club and Roppongi. Now, there is nothing to worry about."

"I see, I see! How about you, Akira?"

"Fine, how about you? Well, in the first place, I did not get injured like Yui did."

"Well~~~ It's good to be youthful! Just a few days ago, I was kicked on the waist by a professional wrestler and my back strain was so painful. It won't heal because I am aged now, right! Kyuu¹!!"

“Please don’t place me in the same position when everyone is confused.”

While placing the teacup in front of the three people after finishing pouring the tea, Kujou denied everything the man, who was called Mr. Gen, had said.

Alias, Mr. Gen.

The man’s real name was Genjirou Fujinami.

He worked in the police office in Shinjuku. He was not a serious man. Although he mainly handled the investigations of murder cases, he barely worked with a team and mostly did stand play².

According to him, it was because people around him were not able to follow his pace.

However, as a policeman, his intuition was very outstanding. He also had the achievement of solving numerous difficult cases with Kujou. Because of that, he had the hidden side of a wide area special investigator.

With a trademark of an unshaven face, he was a cheerful and optimistic policeman who handled outlaw cases.

That was Mr. Gen.

“So. You came here so suddenly, is there anything urgent?”

“Oh, right. It’s the case about the corpse under the cherry blossom tree. You’ve probably heard about it”

“Ah! Wasn’t that the one in the special program of the news this evening?”

Akira was interested by Genjirou’s words.

“I heard that the police has already started interrogating the witnesses.”

“Well, just like what Yui had just said...”

“What happened? Was it wrong?”

Yui tilted her tiny head curiously because of Genjirou, who spoke ambiguously while scratching his chin.

“How am I supposed to say... Well... I don’t feel anything, anything that is related to this case....”

“Are you talking about the intuition you always have?”

Kujou unwillingly gave a helping hand for knowing Genjirou well.

“Right!! That’s what it is!! It’s the intuition I have for being a policeman!!”

“Wait, you mean your intuition? Really, is that going to work?”

“Of course!! That’s how I live!!”

“Now, there are three people that we are interrogating. Since two of them are the owners of the land of the crime scene and the land nearby, the information they can provide can only serve as a reference. But, the other one is a young man who lives in Shinjuku District by himself. He is the ex-boyfriend of the victim. He is now interrogated by the Shinjuku Police Office as a material witness.”

“What? According to the rumor, there isn’t an owner of this piece of land, right?”

Akira asked curiously.

“Oh, after all, a rumor is just a rumor. There actually was an owner when I investigated.”

“Oh~ I see.”

“By the way, Mr.Gen. You talked about her ex-boyfriend, which means you found out the victim’s identity?”

“Oh, after the police in charge of this place dug continuously, they found that personal belongings, such as licenses, were buried right beside the corpse.”

Hearing that, Kujou narrowed his eyebrow and showed a surprised face.

“The victim is Arieru³ Shimizu, female, eighteen years old. By the way, how can it be written as Awahime but pronounced as Arieru!”

“It’s something commonly called a shiny name. Kids are not pets, why can’t the parents think more about the kids who have those kind of names.”

Yui showed a surprised facial expression and sighed while taking the teacup

up.

“Wait, but doesn’t Awahime seem cute?”

“Are you stupid!? Awahime is a word referring to soap girls⁴ since the ancient times..”

“Eh... Mr. Gen, is that true...”

“Definitely true!!”

“Currently, what we need is not origin of the name. And what about the crime scene?”

Although Mr. Gen was showing his knowledge to Akira, who was almost two dozen years younger than him, Kujou moved the conversation on indifferently.

“Since she was partially skeletonized, she passed away between one and two months ago. Since there was a mark with a shape of a string on her neck, she was probably buried with her clothes on after being strangled.”

“The offender that was in a hurry... Was him?”

“Yes, Miss Yui. I’m also curious about that...”

Kujou’s and Yui’s expressions became clouded in the same way.

Looking at them, Genjiro and Akira exchanged friendly glances.

“Well, I think you overthought it. Don’t worry. Also, what happened to the ex-boyfriend?”

Facing Kujou’s question, Genjiro put his hands up, making the pose of surrender.

“He was not helpful at all. It seemed like he had dated the victim for about two months, but they had broken up more than one year ago. He was the one who suggested to break up. Then, he shouldn’t have any resentment. Well, of course, we are still investigating.”

“I see. The material witness was innocent. Your intuition was murmuring that the offender was somewhere else.”

Warm Darjeeling tea was poured into Yui’s empty teacup.

“Exactly. However... This case. I don’t feel like it will end as simply as this.”

Genjirou’s ominous words, which were filled with confidence, froze the atmosphere.

Kujou slowly placed the teapot back to the table, crossed his arms, and adjusted his breathing.

“Then, Mr. Fujinami, I’ll ask you again about your reasons for coming here. What’s your request for this detective agency?”

“Alas. After two months, the Japan-US Summit Conference will be held in Tokyo, right? Because of that, our office is already out of people. Then this case about the corpse under the cherry blossom tree happened, right? We are so busy right now. Really, we are shorthanded, so help us!! Please!!”

Kujou lightly closed his eyes and sighed at Genjirou, who cupped his hands and bowed his head⁵ with momentum in front of Kujou.

“You appear always, always so suddenly and force me to deal with the atrociously difficult tasks... Really, you are making me feel dizzy.”

“Oh!? ‘Making you feel dizzy’ means!?”

“Right. I understand. I will receive this case.”

“You are truly the friend I should have!!”

Genjirou’s face beamed with a smile..

“You scratched a policeman’s back, Kujou.”

“Yes. I will definitely return this favor.”

Not knowing that Yui and Kujou were smiling, an optimistic voice replied..

“Oh! I’ll remember it!! If the time comes when you are arrested, I’ll release you immediately!!”

“That time will never come.”

Kujou replied immediately. Since Genjirou was even more optimistic than he normally was, he could not feel Kujou’s wrath.

“Kujou, then what should I do?”

Akira was listening without speaking a single word until now, then he offered to help the agency’s investigation.

Kujou changed his target of repressed anger immediately.

“You’d better go to the detention cell!!”

“What!? You! What are you talking about!!”

“Oh~ Okay, okay~ Do you want to come with me and stay there tonight?”

In the noisy conversation, Yui stood up from her seat secretly.

“Kujou. I am tired. I am going back to my room to rest.”

“Yes.”

“Eh? Wait a moment, Yui!! Are you going to abandon me!?”

Yui was about to head to her room, but she turned back to Akira, who was feeling anxious and surprised.

“Don’t worry, Akira. If nothing happens, I can get out after forty-eight hours.”

Her face beamed with a smile.

There was no doubt that Akira’s death cry echoed in the room immediately after that.

1. Kyuu – Kujou’s nickname. In Japanese, the Kanji of ku also has the pronunciation of kyuu.↵

2. Stand play – conscious actions in an attempt to highlight one’s presence.↵

3. Arieru – according to the kanji, it should be pronounced as Awahime, but it has the pronunciation of Arieru.↵

4. Soap girls – girls who work for the soap land, a type of Japanese communal bath houses which provides sexual services to male customers.↵

5. Cupped his hands and bowed his head – actions of asking for help sincerely.↵

It had been three days since Genjiro Fujinami came to the detective agency. The world still had no clues about the offender. Wide shows¹ and news were suddenly putting efforts into making special programs for it.

In the dining room of the detective agency, Akira was staring at the TV because he was told to collect all the general information.

The door behind Akira was opened.

“Kid, is there anything going on in society?”

Kujou asked directly when he stepped into the room while holding several documents.

“Hum~ I don’t think there was anything important. Well, compared to the identity of the offender, the mystery of a corpse buried under the cherry blossom tree is more attractive. People say that ‘Isn’t it one of the modern seven wonders?’”

“I see... Since people want the viewing rate. I thought that there should be programs that would only focus on the surface of the case... So the general public is attracted by mysteriousness the mysteries.”

“What do you mean?”

Kujou took out his phone and show the screen to Akira, who could not follow his train of thought.

“Is this Twitter?”

“Right. Look at the item under Trending.”

“Eh...What is this...”

Akira saw the item named ‘Under the cherry blossom tree...’ on the screen and there were millions of tweets about it.

“People are looking for the offender?”

“No.”

Saying that, Kujou sighed.

“There are rumors ranging from speculations that ‘Wherever there are beautiful cherry blossom trees, there must be some corpses buried under them’

to affirmations that ‘There are corpse buried under the cherry blossom tree over there.’”

“Nobody cares about the victim. People are experiencing schadenfreude.”

Wearing a light pink jersey, Yui stood next to Akira without him noticing.

When Akira saw Yui in unusually scanty clothes, his face flushed.

Right after that, the corner of a phone hit Akira between his eyebrows.

“Don’t look at Miss Yui with lust, you erotic kappa²!!”

“Ouch... Wait... You, how can you hit me between my eyebrow?”

While belittling Akira, who was on his knees, Kujou pulled out a chair lightly in the dining room for Yui.

Sitting onto the chair nimbly as if she was following Kujou’s action, Yui noticed the documents Kujou was holding.

“Kujou, what are they?”

“The information regarding the victim I investigated these days. Here you are.”

After handing the documents, Kujou went into the kitchen. He seemed to be preparing to boil water.

“Damn it... That violent butler.”

Akira was rubbing the area between his eyebrows and slowly sat down onto the chair next to Yui.

“So Yui. What’s written over there ?”

She read the documents aloud while slowly explaining them, so that there would be easier for Akira to understand.

“Arieru Shimizu, eighteen years old. Female. The cause of her death was being pressured by something similar to a string, causing suffocation. The hyoid bone was found fractured, indicating that the string was bold. Also, from the rate it skeletonized, she was probably dead about one or two month ago.”

“Up till now, it’s still exactly the same as what Mr. Gen had told us last time.”

“Oh, yeah.”

“Continue?”

“The victim had no delinquency history or arrest record. People living around her house said they were a good family because they had a good relationship. She went to coeducational elementary, middle, and high schools. Her grades were neither very good nor very bad, but she was a hard worker, so she left the teachers and students with a good impression. ”

“Eh? That means she had no problem that could lead to her death?”

“Just from reading the paperwork, the victim was not a person that would be hated by others.”

“Just like what Miss Yui said. She was a normal girl who was suddenly murdered and buried.”

Answering, Kujou placed the teacups, which were impressive due to their gold and blue lines, onto the table,

“Did her family member put out a notice for a disappearing person?”

“Yes. About two month ago, they send it to the local police office. Also, there wasn't any expensive insurance on her.”

“Hum... Then there is only a small chance for the offender to be one of her relatives.”

Murmuring, Yui crossed her arms and moved onto the back of the chair.

It was at that time.

“Oh, no! I, I think I solved it!!”

Akira put his two hands onto the table abruptly and kept speaking after doing so.

“This is! A camouflage of the time of murder! Listen! Arieru was killed recently. After that, her corpse was placed on the ground. The offender waited for the point when the corpse was deteriorated enough and buried it under that cherry blossom tree! Then he could disguise the time of murder!!”

“Good job, kid.”

“Right!! I’m so awesome-!!”

Being praised by Kujou, who seldom praised others, Akira’s mood became extremely good.

However...

“Then will you please explain your conclusion in detail, including the subtle differences between the skeletonization processes of corpses being above and underground.”

“... Eh?...”

Akira had been in an extremely good mood. He, who had been lifting his two hands up towards the ceiling and dancing with joy, stiffened.

“Idiot. Whether the corpses are exposed to the air makes a huge difference in the skeletonization process. Also, if it is over the ground, you won’t be able to cover the stink during decomposition. Furthermore! Just a moment ago, we had talked about that a notice for a disappearing person was put out in the police office two months ago. Is there a flower blooming in your head³!? That’s joyful.”

Akira’s mood dropped being in heaven to hell.

Akira’s heart was broken due the multiple actions from the hateful Kujou.

No, his heart pretended to be broken.

There were flames dwelling in his eyes.

Akira raise his head and announced another possibility.

“I solved it!! The one before was incorrect!! Arieru’s parents killed her about half year ago or a year ago! And then kept her body inside the refrigerator...”

“Shut up, Flower Garden!!”

“Fl... Flower... Garden?”

The words shocked Akira so much that he totally stopped thinking.

“I thought there was only one flower blooming in your brain, but now I know there is a flower garden. Let them wither right now!! Let everything wither!!”

Akira's heart was... broken thoroughly.

He sat onto the chair powerlessly and lay on the table.

"In the first place, there isn't a single reason for a complete stranger to take that many risks in order to camouflage the time of murder. Furthermore, it was a well-known fact that she had a good relationship with her family members. There wasn't any expensive insurance on her. I can't think of any merit in or reasons for her close relatives to murder her."

Finishing this sentence, Kujou slowly pressed onto the teastick of the tea server, which was moderately red, and the tea leaves being pressed sank to the bottom.

"So, Kujou. Are there any witnesses who had seen the corpse being buried at the crime scene or any suspects?"

"Last night, I've heard from Mr. Gen that the police did not have any more information at the time."

Yui sighed lightly.

"In the first place, the corpse was abandoned in Chichibu, Saitama Prefecture. Normally, if there was a stranger, the residents should notice... However, this case happened in a remote mountain. There was no houses within two kilometers from the crime scene. The owner of the cherry blossom trees was living in another prefecture and was not even likely to visit there once a year."

"... What... So there weren't any witnesses?"

Drooping his head, Akira spoke regretfully.

Looking at the two who were blocked in every direction, Kujou poured the English Breakfast Tea into the teacups placed in a line.

"Continue from where we left off, regarding information from the police, the corpse was skeletonized and injured. They could not find any evidence besides the marks indicating that the neck was pressured by something similar to a string, causing suffocation. Also, the material witness was already interrogated returned to his normal life, although he is still monitored by the policy. Well, since the police were lacking information, there is nothing we can tell right

now.”

Finished pouring tea, Kujou sat onto the chair silently.

Instead of mixing with the tea, the milk being added into the black tea sank to the bottom of the teacup similar to white smoke.

No one at the detective agency could even grasp the silhouette of the offender. The heavy atmosphere that was more astringent than black tea encompassed this room.

1. Wide shows – TV programs that mainly targeted at housewives. They include scandals and gossips about celebrities and politicians.↵

2. Kappa – a Japanese youkai which looks a child with a dish at the top of its head. It likes to play tricks such as drowning people.↵

3. A flower blooming in your head – describing Akira’s naïveté and positivity with a negative connotation.↵

5

The next day.

Kujou and Yui had been staring at the TV programs since early morning.

“We are connected to the scene and the relay broadcast right now. Mr. Kinashi?”

“Yes. This is Kinashi.”

The rookie reporter was a young man and he continued talking with a stressful expression.

“I am now in Fuji, Shizuoka Prefecture. Here inside the foot of the Fuji Mountain, the second possible victim of the case regarding the corpse under the cherry blossom trees was dug up.”

“How was the corpse dug up?”

The woman news caster of a studio in Tokyo asked calmly.

“According to the police, a group of two males dug up a corpse that was completely skeletonized under a cherry blossom tree yesterday, at midnight. Regarding the question of ‘Even though there are many cherry blossom trees planted in Fuji, why did you choose to dig this one,’ the discoverers responded that they wanted to confirm the Tweets on Twitter. This is all from the scene. I will report if there is new information..”

While the reporter saying this, the TV screen returned to the news studio.

“Kujou, this is...”

Yui turned her gaze to Kujou.

“Chichibu and Fuji. Although the corpses were found in two places that are far apart, I think the cases were done by the same person.”

After confirming that the news series had ended, Kujou turned off the TV. He placed his right hand on his chin and started to contemplate.

Looking at him, Yui reached both of her hands towards the hot milk and drank it.

In the dining room without the two’s voices, there was only silence

However, the silence which deepened their contemplation was broken with insolence in no time.

The distant entrance was opened with momentum and closed with an intense sound. The same abruptness approached the dining room with strong footsteps.

In the next moment, the door of the dining room was opened with momentum that it almost broke it.

“Kujou!! Have you seen the news...”

Kujou rapidly and accurately stabbed Akira, who had flown into the dining room, at Akira’s solar plexus with the remote control placed aside by him at once.

“Hum? Oh. It was you instead of a ruffian. I apologize. I am sorry for not hitting between your eyebrows. ”

“... You... You mistook me for what you should... apologize... about.”

Akira fell down onto his knees and leaked the floor¹ impressively.

Akira blinked with a dazed look.

“Kujou and I were just watching that news here.”

“Then, what do you think? So do you think they were done by the same offender!?”

“Well, I cannot accurately say. I was saying they were probably done by the same offender.”

“I see, I see!! I agree with your opinion~”

Because his inference was correct, Akira put all the scones left over into his mouth joyfully.

“Miss Yui, I’m thinking of leaving this house for two to three days.”

“Are you going to the scene?”

“Yes. Not only because the information I can obtain from the news is limited, but because I also think there is information I can obtain only if I go to the scene, such as similarities between the two victims.”

“Ok. I got it. Be careful on your way.”

“Thank you very much.”

Having received permission from the owner, Kujou bowed.

“Yup! Don’t worry!! For I will protect both Yui and this house when you are not here!!”

Hearing that, Kujou let out a big sigh.

“Although this is completely against my will, I have no other choice. Akira, take care of Miss Yui.”

Ending his sentence, Kujou pulled a bundle of paper with a thickness of fifteen centimeters out of nowhere and placed it in front of Akira’s eyes with a “Don”

sound.

Akira's eyes widened.

"Wh, what is, this?"

"A butler manual."

"What!?"

"Finish reading all of this within an hour. That way, even you can master the tasks of a butler perfectly."

"Wait, it's impossible to finish reading something this thick!!"

"Assuming something is impossible without actually doing it is the way of thinking of a loser. Plus..."

Kujou lowered his voice.

"Kid... You look like you forgot to give a gift to Miss Yui on White Day² in return for the chocolate you received from her on Valentine's Day."

"Why!! How... did you... know that?"

Akira turned to Yui, who was sitting right beside him, nervously.

There, Yui was facing their back, laying on the table and shaking her legs.

She had a completely unhappy face.

"I know, kid. You are in the most urgent situation. Read this manual well and master the work of a butler. That way, Miss Yui might have a better mood. I am providing you with a chance to redeem yourself."

Kujou showed a smug expression.

"... Okay... I know... I will try."

Realizing that Yui's heart was hurt by his blunder, Akira stated his will powerlessly with his forehead on the table.

Just after noon that day, Kujou got off at JR³ Mishima Station in Mishima, which was near Fuji, Shizuoka Prefecture.

Mishima is located east of Fuji. The distance between Mishima and Numazu, which is north of Suruga Bay and prosperous due to its seafood, is as close as the distance between the eyes and the tip of the nose.

It was also the first station of the train while the terminal station was at Shuzenji on the Izu Peninsula. The streets around the station were lively.

Then, why did Kujou got off at the Mishima Station instead of the one in Fuji?

That could be seen in retrospect after knowing what happened around two hours before the current time.

“Hello, this is Kujou.”

“Is that you, Kyuu⁴? Where are you now?”

A call from Genjirou had caused Kujou’s phone to vibrate.

“At Tokyo Station. I’m heading to the crime scene in Fuji.”

“Indeed, your actions are so fast. However, even if you go to the crime scene, you probably won’t obtain any information. The corpse has already skeletonized thoroughly. However, I have good news for you: he has been identified.”

“Even though he was completely skeletonized, his has already been identified?”

Surprised, Kujou knitted his brows.

“Oh. Similar to the case in Chichibu, his identification was buried with his body carefully.”

Speechless, Kujou pressed his right temple with his finger.

“The victim was Jedi Aoki, who lived in Mishima, Shizuoka Prefecture. He was twenty years old. Male.”

“Eh? If his name was Jedi, does that mean a foreigner was involved in this crime?”

“No. His name was written as Kishi but read as Jedi!! Really, to an aged man, this is so difficult to read!!”

“... That name shows such good taste...”

Genjirou and Kujou seemed to have a headache due to reasons completely unrelated to the case itself.

“What we have to do now is to ask the police office to confirm with the bereaved relatives. Well, it would be mean to go to the relatives directly. I think it’s better to go to Mishima and inquire around there. I will send a message to you for further information.”

“I see. That’s true. Thank you, Mr. Gen.”

Only people like Mr. Gen who were not restricted by the law could disclose this kind of information.

After having received Genjirou’s desire to solve this case, Kujou got onto Shinkansen⁶.

North exit of JR Mishima Station.

Under the endless, sunny sky, which gave people a great mood, the Fuji Mountain there was aloft with snow on the top.

The color and size of the Fuji Mountain looked different than looking at it from Tokyo.

Breathing in a large amount of cool air, Kujou checked the message from Genjirou on his phone.

“Mr. Aoki’s address... Oh, it’s on the north.”

Murmuring, Kujou called a taxi and headed to the victim’s home.

Moving to the north on the national highway of Japan.

Although some of the cherry blossom trees nearby were becoming hazakura⁵, they were closer to being fully bloomed.

“Corpses were buried under the cherry blossom trees... Were there?”

Murmuring to himself, Kujou looked at the cherry blossoms that were

dropping from the tree.

The taxi stopped soon after that.

A residential area had been built there after cutting through the mountains.

After Kujou got off the taxi, he found Aoki's house right away among the similar structured houses.

The police probably had already disclosed the information of the victim while Kujou was on the Shinkansen. Because of that, people from three different TV stations and several people who looked like journalist had scrambled to and gathered in front of the house.

"... This probably won't work... "

Breathing out in large breaths, Kujou turned back and headed to the local residents who were looking at the Aoki family at a distance.

"Um, excuse me. I am from a TV station. Is it possible to ask you some questions? Did you know Jedi Aoki well?"

Kujou used a nice and gentle voice to ask. A plumpish mid-aged woman who had a kappa hairstyle answered with an energetic voice so loud that it could even be considered noisy.

"Of course! He was such an intelligent child. He was famous around here!!"

"He helped his family so well that I really admire him!"

"Right~"

Swaying her disheveled, wild hairstyle, a tall woman who had a slim face responded and the two showed that they shared the same opinion.

"Was he the only child in the Aoki family?"

"Yeah, that's why he always said 'I will work hard so that my parents can live more comfortably~!!!'"

"I heard that he was also the president of the student council or something. Students younger than him all admired him."

"I can't believe a wonderful child like him was killed. I wish my stupid son could replace him."

“Hey, what are you talking about? Death ends everything. It’s more important to be alive.”

“Yeah, you’re right!!”

Saying that, the two housewives laughed out loud.

“... After all, they feel like this case doesn’t affect them at all...”

Kujou murmured with a voice which was too low to be heard by them. After thanking them, he left.

It was after Kujou finished asking several groups of residents, went downhill, and returned to the place near the entrance.

Three girls who looked like high schoolers were in their uniforms and walking towards Kujou.

“Excuse me. Can I borrow few minutes of your time to ask some questions? I think you have already heard about this on the news. It’s about Jedi Aoki.”

Although the three people were stopped so suddenly, they answered kindly.

“That person seems to have been our senpai from our school. I don’t remember exactly when, but he had suddenly disappeared. ”

“Disappeared?”

Kujou asked back to the girl with a brown semi-long hairstyle.

“When did that happen?”

“Umm, I remember... It happened when we were freshmen, so it was around two years ago?”

A girl with a tan skin color next to her answered and then drank her sports drink.

Kujou knitted his eyebrows slightly.

“I am surprised. How did you know that?”

The girl at the end with short black hair asked a question that Kujou wanted to ask.

“Well, of course. He was a senpai in our club.”

“Eh!? Really!?”

The girl with black hair looked like she had not heard that before. She was very surprised.

According to their conversation, the three were the kouhai of the club that Jedi Aoki was part of.

“Speaking of two years ago, wasn’t that when you two were freshmen? Do you remember the feeling that Jedi gave off? ”

“He was a nice and helpful senpai. He worked hard in the club and also taught us schoolwork when we were confused.”

“He taught me as well. He was easy-going and was famous among both senpai and kouhai.”

“Then why did he disappear?”

The freshman girl with black hair asked.

“Well? The counselor said that he disappeared without telling anyone.”

It seemed like the black haired kouhai had lost her interest. She answered casually and started playing on her phone.

“Last question. Where is your school?”

“The high school right to the north of Mishima Station.”

“I see. Thank you”

After receiving the new information that Jedi disappeared two years ago, Kujou started to walk back along the road he had come from via taxi.

The longer evening, which announced that spring was here, cast Kujou’s shadow onto the national highway.

After Arieru Shimizu, Kujou’s heart was hurt by the fact that another innocent child became a victim. His footsteps were heavier than usual.

1. Leaked the floor – a Japanese phrase used in MMORPG (massively multiplayer online role-playing games) to describe the situation that a character of a player cannot fight anymore. When the character faces down, he looks like he is leaking he floor.↩

2. White Day – a day that is marked in Japan, South Korea, Taiwan, and China on March 14, one month after Valentine’s Day.↵
3. JR – Japan Railways.↵
4. Kyuu – Kujou’s nickname. In Japanese, the Kanji of ku also has the pronunciation of kyuu.↵
5. Hazakura – a stage of a cherry blossom tree when its leaves start to appear. “Ha” means “leaf” or “leaves” and “zakura,” or “sakura,” means cherry blossom trees. The leaves of cherry blossom trees grow out after the petals fall off.↵
6. Shinkansen – a network of high-speed railway lines in Japan operated by five Japan Railways Group companies.↵

6

Two days had already passed when Kujou returned to the house at night.

“That is all for the local report regarding the abandonment incident of Jedi Aoki’s corpse.”

After he finished hearing Kujou’s explanation, Yui placed the report onto the table and drank the lemon tea which had become slightly warm.

“Has Mr.Gen said anything?”

Akira poured the warm black tea into Kujou’s empty teacup with his awkward technique.

“He said that ‘The DNA of the skeleton found in Fuji matched up with the DNA found in his house. Of course, we will pay more attention to this case and continue the investigation.’”

“Then, what about Arieru?”

“The DNAs and teeth also matched up.”

“Then the items buried with them actually belonged to them, right?”

“Yes.”

Akira poured the black tea into Yui’s teacup, who crossed her arms and was

worried.

“By the way, what was the cause of death of Jedi?”

“We can’t really tell the cause of death from a completely skeletonized body, but from the fact that there weren’t any evidence of injury from blades on the bones and the fractured hyoid, he probably died from suffocation due to the pressure on his neck similar to Miss Shimizu. Of course, there’s the possibility of poisoning or illness, but it would be hard to tell from a skeletonized body.”

Even Kujou was distressed. He closed his eyes and leaned into the chair.

“The two offenders are similar. Both had peaceful families and were eighteen year old high schoolers who were well liked by people in the surrounding areas and schools. They had no history of delinquency or crime and no evidence of people hating them. Although they were buried in different places, they were both buried under unknown cherry blossom trees.”

“There are a bunch of similarities!! Also, both of their names were weird!!”

After hearing Yui’s conclusion, Akira said these words with an air of importance.

“Listen to me, Akira. In this case, the offenders had too many similarities that we have the problem of focusing on one of them.”

“U~m, I see... Ah! Then!! Did Arieru and Jedi know each other?”

Kujou answered Akira’s optimistic question curtly with his eyes closed.

“Their respective friends were investigated; however, they only knew this case from the news and did not know anything about the other victim. In the first place, regarding to Mr. Aoki, he was thought to be murdered when he disappeared two years ago. Also, considering they were living two different places, there is a high possibility they did not know each other..

“I see...”

Akira made that suggestion because he thought that they might come up with some new discoveries, but he missed the target and stared at the teapot with discouragement. He stood still.

The atmosphere was heavy.

Kujou turned to another topic with a cheerful tone in order to drive away the gloom.

“Kid, how was the world during the time I was out? Were there any new discoveries regarding the case?”

“... Umm, there was nothing in particular related to the case. The TV stations and magazines were, if anything, enjoying the investigation as best as they could, saying things like ‘How does the criminal look like?’ or ‘Who is the offender according to profiling?’”

Saying that, Akira realized something and quickly turned his head up.

“Oh! Yeah!! I realized something!!”¹

“Your head?”

“Of course not!!”

“So, what happened?”

“Don’t continue that arbitrarily!!”

Yui’s facial expression became milder because of the conversation between the two with sharp mind.

“Well, although the case is on the news as well, it’s out of control on Twitter right now. Wasn’t the second corpse found under a cherry blossom tree? Because the founders said they saw the Tweets on Twitter and they actually found one, so the people trying to dig under cherry blossom trees with the intention of treasure hunting are increasing now. There are also increasing Tweets about ‘There is a corpse buried under a cherry blossom tree somewhere.’”

“Seriously, there are too many tasteless fellows.”

Saying that, Yui sighed with dissatisfaction and anger.

“... Akira... Good job.”

Realizing something, Kujou praised Akira.

“Although I focused too much on cherry blossom trees... It is Twitter. I remember that the news regarding the discovery of the corpse of Mr. Jedi said

something about that... That means there is a high possibility for the offender to send messages on Twitter.”

“If the offender is using Twitter, can we track him from there?”

“Exactly as what Miss Yui said, but the offender probably used a prepaid phone and created an account without leaving any evidence.”

“And there are countless secret ways to do that.”

“Although people are not necessary imitating, there are people who spread the fake Tweets for fun. Are we going to find the real ones out of the fake ones!? Isn’t that impossible? ”

What Akira had said was exactly on point.

It was extremely difficult to find the real Tweets out of all the fake ones that had spread after all this time.

“Well, I will ask Mr. Gen to see if he can search the logs. Akira, focus on Twitter completely. There will probably be more people who want to dig corpses out just for fun. If that happens, tell me immediately. I have a premonition that this case will affect a wide range of areas. Although this is against my will, I have to entrust you to be the hero for now”

“Ok, I got it. I will focus on Twitter!”

Akira hit his chest vigorously.

Kujou was satisfied by the answer and smiled.

Then.

“Akira, I need more tea.”

“Oh! Here!!”

While saying that, Akira tilted the teapot in his hand and poured the warm black tea into Kujou’s cup.

Kujou nodded while checking Akira’s reaction. He said with a smile:

“Butler Akira. You are in the right shape.”

During the two days Kujou was away, Akira had read through the manual and

put all his efforts into being a butler. He had reflexively poured the black tea into the teacup that was placed out.

“Eh?... Ah—!!”

Having realized what Kujou had said, Akira placed the teapot down violently.

“Ku, Kujou, since you are back now, this is no longer my job! Pour it yourself!!”

Answered reflexively like a dog, Akira became embarrassed by his own action. His face flushed and became sulky like a kid.

Kujou and Yui laughed at the Akira’s adorable action.

The next day.

The morning news program urged the audience to stop hurting and digging the cherry blossom trees for fun in addition to the report of the case regarding to the corpses under the cherry blossom trees.

“Seven cherry blossom trees were dug up just yesterday... Oh, seriously?”

After saying that, Yui put the scrambled eggs that overflowed with the scent of butter into her mouth.

“However, there were no corpses found under those seven cherry blossom trees. Also, according to Akira’s report, there are over one thousand of Tweets that say ‘There are bodies buried here.’”

“By the way, how is Akira?”

“Today is a weekday, so he is probably in school. He said he will come in the evening. Thanks to him, we can enjoy a tranquil breakfast. ”

Kujou put some of the green salad into his small plate, topped it with onion dressing, and tried to fit it into his mouth.

However, a call from his phone interrupted him.

He slowly put down his fork and tapped the “Answer” button.

“Hey~~~ Kyuu!! How are you~?”²

The energetic voice leaked out from the speaker furiously in the morning.

Kujou gave out a huge sigh exaggeratedly and put the phone next to his ear.

“You are so energetic in the morning, Mr. Gen. Are you drinking?”

“What~ Sighing in the morning is such a boring action. By the way, I’m not drinking!!”

“...So. What’s going on with you? Why are you so sober, Mr. Gen?”

“Umm? Since it’s inconvenient to talk over the phone, I’m heading to your place.”

“What!?”

Kujou spoke with an unusually loud voice because his plan of having a tranquil breakfast was nullified.

Not leaving him with the time to calm down his astonishment, the door of the detective agency’s dining room was opened widely.

“Yo~ I’m coming~”

Genjirou was excessively energetic in the morning. He was standing there with his right hand raised up cheerfully and a smile on his face.

The melting butter on a thick slice of toast that had just been toasted released its rich scent.

The sour tasting Kilimanjaro coffee was placed beside it.

“Anyway, you haven’t had anything, right? Here you go.”

Receiving Kujou’s abrupt kindness, Genjirou laughed heartily.

“Oh, oh, oh, I will take it. Ah, oh, sugar. Do you have sugar?”

He scooped a heap of sugar out of the sugar pot that was handed to him silently from Kujou.

“If you put that much sugar into the coffee, you will ruin the rich taste and aroma of the coffee.”

Ignoring Kujou, Genjirou sprinkled a heap of sugar onto the butter toast.

“What!? Wait!! What are you doing!!”

“This is deli~cious! The food called butter sugar toast!!”

While speaking, Genjirou opened his mouth widely and bit down onto the handmade butter sugar toast.

“My head hurts... Such a perverse and indelicate action!”

Regretting for his own kindness, Kujou put his hand to the place between his brows and let out a deep sigh.

“Ku, Ku, Ku, Kujou... That... looks delicious.”

“What?” Kujou looked up.

As if she had discovered a novelty, Yui’s eyes shined with desires. She looked at Genjirou’s sugar toast that she wanted so badly.

There was a shiny drop near her mouth.

“P, Please stop, Miss Yui! That a food for plebeians. It isn’t suitable for Miss Yui’s mouth!!”

“Really? This is so delicious~ Hey, hey~ Yui-chan, would you like to have some~”

“So annoying!! You shut up!!”

While covering up Yui’s eyes with his two hands, Kujou moved on to the main topic.

“So, have you been investigating the log of Twitter all night?”

“Oh, of course.”

Saying that, Genjirou tossed several documents at Kujou’s hand.

“The username of the account that tweeted about the burial place of Jedi Aoki’s corpse was @ADO_1150. His followings and followers were zero. And that Tweet only mentioned that ‘There is a corpse buried under this cherry blossom tree’ after indicating the place... I see...”

Kujou frowned and continued looking for useful information.

“The user used a prepaid SIM card and created the account from a

smartphone. At that time, the signal was sent from a location near Akihabara, Chiyota District, Tokyo”

“Well, the user probably bought this SIM card at a garage sale or nearly illegal stalls that you can see frequently during the weekends. It’s impossible to search from there.”

While saying that, Genjiro drank half of the Kilimanjaro coffee at once.

“Right now, I’m concerned about the case before Aoki’s. For the case of Shimizu, were there any notices from Twitter?”

Being released from Kujou’s blindfolding, Yui asked a question to Genjiro.

“Oh, I was concerned about this. Yesterday midnight, I asked the founders who were waked up by the police. And then... Right! I was correct!! That information is on the last page of the document.”

Yui looked into the folded document beside Kujou’s hands.

“A week before the corpse was found, there was a Tweet similar to the one from Aoki’s case.... Then the Tweet was discovered by the president of Mystery Club by chance and actually took an action... The Tweet contains a similar message, including the address of the crime scene and that sentence of ‘There is a corpse buried under this cherry blossom tree.’ The signal was sent in Ouji, Kita District, Tokyo. And the username of the account is @ROK_1150.”

“This was probably tweeted from a prepaid SIM card as well.”

Genjiro drank the rest of the Kilimanjaro coffee with satisfaction and started to talk about the police’s opinions so far.

“Considering that the offender used prepaid SIM cards, the location of the signals are probably fake. This means that the offender probably does not want to be caught. However, there are several contradictions in this case.”

Genjiro put both of his elbows onto the table, leaning his body forward.

“The first one is about the items found with the bodies. In both cases, although there are not that many items, objects such as licenses that could serve as identification were buried with the corpses. The second one is about the notice on Twitter. This action indicated that the offender hoped that the

corpses could be discovered. What does the offender want to do?”

“... A game...”

Yui and Genjiro looked at each other because of the ominous words murmured by Kujou.

“Without leaving any evidence, the offender seems like he is ridiculing the police who is forestalled by his actions. And using Twitter is an action to attract the attention of society.”

“So he is a sadistic criminal!?”

The offender irritated Genjiro.

“Mr. Aoki was murdered two years ago and Miss Shimizu was murdered several months ago. Thinking about the criminal mindset and actions of the offender... It is possible that he has murdered more people within this time frame. Plus... Please look at this.”

After saying that, Kujou pointed to the two parts regarding the Twitter usernames within the document brought by Genjiro.

“In Mr. Aoki’s case, the username is @ADO_1150. In Miss Shimizu’s case, the username is @ROK_1150. Although the letters in the front are different, the numbers after the underscores are the same. I think this is a challenge, or a code, from the offender who owns the Twitter accounts.”

“What!?”

Genjiro became speechless.

“In this case, I think it’s impossible for the offender to kill more people from now on, because he has already murdered all the people and tweeted Tweets after he had finished preparing everything.”

“A well-planned... murder game?”

Finished hearing Kujou’s conclusion, Yui slightly let out a breath.

“Then if this is a game, what is this 1150? What is this!?”

“... As of now, we don’t know...”

Unable to answer Genjiro’s indignation, Kujou dropped his shoulders with

chagrin.

“However... As what Kujou has said, if the intelligent criminal is enjoying this game, then there must be some kind of meaning behind the usernames. Tell Akira about this as well and ask him to monitor it. We must find out the joker who views murdering people as a game.”

Yui blew the dark, heavy, and negative atmosphere away with her positive voice.

“... Yeah... Right!”

Touched by Yui’s feelings, Genjiro cracked his knuckles energetically.

“Alright!! Then I’ll tell the police who is responsible for this case to reinforce the monitoring of Twitter!!”

“Hum? ‘The police who is responsible for this case?’ By the way, Mr. Gen, are you still not responsible for this case?”

“Well, not really~ Because of the order from people of higher levels, I have to be the secretary in the Counterterrorism Room of the Summit Conference. They are distributing people only to that side as usual.”

“Then what about the Investigation Headquarter mentioned in the TV?”

“Ah~ That kind of thing. It’s just a saying!! In fact, it has too few people that it cannot even investigate the case. It’s like compared to the security of most of the citizens, the security of top brass is more important~ I can’t understand the way of thinking of the higher ups!!”

Genjiro used abusive languages as if he was complaining about his daily annoyances. Then he stood up swiftly.

“As a result, you guys are necessary to continue the investigation. Please catch the insolent offender of this case. Kyuu and Yui-chan! I’ll leave it you!!”

Saying that, Genjiro threw a wink to the two and valiantly went out of the dining room of the detective agency.

However, two weeks later.

The worst part of Kujou’s conclusion was correct.

1. I realized something – it can also be interpreted as “Something bad is happening.”↵
2. Kyuu – Kujou’s nickname. In Japanese, the Kanji of ku also has the pronunciation of kyuu.↵

7

“This is Kinashi from the crime scene!! Continuing from last night, the fourth corpse was buried under a cherry blossom tree on a mountain where the Kameyama Lake can be overlooked here in Kimitsu, Chiba Prefecture!!”

Perhaps because the crime scene was halfway up the mountain, sweat appeared on the face of the reporter who called himself Kinashi.

The camera of the TV station’s focus panned to the cherry blossom trees.

In the video, there was yellow tape with “Keep out” on them and more than ten police officers. Then there was a magnificent cherry blossom tree standing secretly at the innermost part.

“This series of cases shares the similarity of having items buried with the corpses. Is it correct for this one as well?”

Facing the question from the main caster in the studio, the reporter on the crime scene answered immediately,

“Yes, the corpse has just been accommodated and some items were dug up at the same time. Also, regarding the identity of the corpse, the police will explain it later with the information regarding the third corpse.”

“I see. Can I ask another question? At the crime scene, are there any other things or pieces of information that might be related to the identity of the corpse?”

When the camera returned to the reporter, he was flipping through the documents in his hands.

“Let me see. Our office investigated this case by ourselves. When we searched for information on missing young adults near the crime scene, we found that there was a male who has been missing since approximated one

year and three months ago in Kisarazu.”

“They might be related. I see. Thank you very much. If there is more information regarding this case in the future, please report it to us.”

When the camera returned to the studio, the special programs with telops ¹ invited the famous critics whose actions were usually unknown to discuss about the case that progressed so suddenly for the first time after two weeks.

“The Golden Week ² has just started, and corpses were found two days in a row... ”

Yui put the macaron called Berry Berry into her mouth.

“I thought nothing was going to happen because it had been peaceful for two weeks since Jedi was found, but two corpses were found suddenly. What is the criminal thinking about? ”

While saying this, Akira put an orange and a matcha macaron into his mouth at the same time.

“I don’t know if the offender wants to attract attention since he chose to take actions during the Golden Week. Is there anything going on with Twitter?”

“Ho, ho! I found one!! #*&!! So look at this*%@%^@##!!”

Akira’s cheeks inflated and as if he was a squirrel. He wanted to say something desperately, but the large amount of macarons in his mouth obstructed him from doing so.

“Okay, I see. You want some drinks immediately, right? I happened to some boiling water that is super hot right now. Open your mouth! I’ll pour all of it into your mouth!!”

Right beside Akira, who had opened his eyes widely, Kujou was standing with a pot that played the sound of boiling water in his hand and an evil smile on his face.

“Even Akira will die from that. Stop.”

“Yes. Then I’ll bring some fresh raspberries.”

While saying that, Kujou headed to the kitchen.

Akira, who was saved by Yui's one sentence, swallowed the macarons inside his mouth very hard and took his phone out of his pocket.

"Because Kujou told me to do so, I had been monitoring the usernames on Twitter for the past two weeks, but found nothing mentionable. But... Look!!"

"@SAGE_1150."

"Right! This is the user that had posted the Tweet about the third corpse found yesterday."

"Umm. Similar to the previous ones, it only has the address and the sentence, 'There is a corpse buried under this cherry blossom tree.'"

"And... This is..."

Akira changed the screen on his phone.

"This is what I found today, the user name that indicated the fourth place. Called @GIA_1150."

There was only one Tweet and it contained the same information as the previous ones.

"So, Akira, write out all the usernames we have found so far."

Kujou commanded after he put the teacups that contained light blue raspberries tea that was at its peak time to drink in front of Yui and Akira.

"Let me see... Wait a second... I remember that the first one is @ROK_1150, the second one is @ADO_1150. And the third one is @SAGE_1150, the fourth one is @GIA_1150, right!!"

On the piece of paper placed on the table, mysterious letters and numbers were lined up.

"Mr. Gen has said this as well, that the number 1150 appears in every single username."

"It doesn't seem like a ZIP code or a telephone number... What is it?"

Yui and Akira put their elbows onto the table and used their right hands to support their chins as if they were contemplating.

“Not only the numbers, the letters before the underscores also perplex me. They seem like the initials or abbreviations of something. Because we are severely lacking clues, I don’t know.”

“There are too many possibilities, so you don’t know which one is the definitive one?”

“Yes. Just as you have said, Miss Yui.”

Kujou sipped the sweet-sour raspberry tea and continued looking at the piece of paper with the four usernames silently.

“For now, let’s just wait for information from Mr. Gen. Akira. Continue monitoring Twitter. There might be a Tweet indicating the address of where the fifth corpse is buried.”

“Okay! I’ll do it!!”

Akira became pleasant after accepting Yui’s trust. He started staring at the screen of his phone immediately.

Several hours after that.

When the night fell, the interview with the police was held.

Since it was only several hours after the case was revealed, there wasn’t much detailed information. Only basic information, such as the identities of the corpse, was announced.

The third corpse, found yesterday, was Loveho Aida, female. The estimated age for when she was murdered was eighteen. She was discovered under a cherry blossom tree at the foot of Mount Tsukuba in Tsukuba, Ibaraki Prefecture. Approximately one-third of the corpse was skeletonized. After the DNA test, it was confirmed that the items buried with the corpse belonged to her. Furthermore, her family members put out a notice for missing person seven months ago and it was accepted by their local police office.

And the fourth corpse, found today, was Skull Yamaguchi, male. The estimated age for when he was murdered was eighteen. Three-fourths of his corpse found under a cherry blossom tree near Kameyama Lake, Kimitsu, Chiba

Prefecture was skeletonized. His family members put out a notice for missing person one year and three months ago. Similar to Loveho, it was confirmed that the items buried with him belonged to him after the DNA test.

After the announcement from the police, Yui and Kujou knitted their brows, trying to grasp the whole story of this case with information including the information they had just obtained.

At that moment, Akira, who had devoted his mind the most diligently to the TV, broke the silence in the detective agency.

“The third corpse is Loveho. The fourth one is Skull... Hey, Kujou... Is this case a murder of people with shiny names?”

“Impossible! Idiot!!”

“But, think of this~ Don’t the names of the fourth people who were murdered stick out too much!? Isn’t this a murder evolving from bullying?”

“Well, if their names were too shiny, people around them might look at them in a strange way. Actually, I have heard of cases that evolved from bullying because of that... However, this case is probably different. Saitama Prefecture, Shizuoka Prefecture, Ibaraki Prefecture, and Chiba Prefecture. Not only are the locations of the crime scenes different, the time the victims were murdered are also different. If everything is like Akira had just said, that it evolved from bullying, it should have a substantial number of people involved. During these two years, it is impossible that none of those offenders had ever divulged this case.”

Realizing that Akira, who tilted his head, did not understand anything from his expression, Kujou explained it in detail.

“Basically, what Miss Yui wanted to say was that this is not a murder case evolved from bullying that happened at multiple locations simultaneously.”

“U~mm, is that right... Umm? Then, is it by chance that these four people were killed? According to the news, it seems like these people don’t share even one similarity.”

“I was thinking about that this morning, but from the interview, I found only one similarity of these four people.”

“Eh!? There is one!?”

Having not realizing it, Akira opened his eyes widely with astonishment.

“Weren’t all four people murdered when they were eighteen?”

“Eh~~~ Wasn’t that by chance?”

“Explode, you idiot.”

“... You... You called me an idiot...”

Kujou might have heard Akira’s murmuring, or he might have not, but he continued calmly.

“Listen. According to the common criminal psychology, the action of burying a corpse indicates that the offender doesn’t want the corpse to be found. Since he doesn’t want the corpse to be found, he would try to destroy all the evidence regarding the corpse.”

“Yeah, yeah,” Akira nodded slightly.

“However, in this case, his actions after burying the corpses were the exact opposite. He purposely announced the locations of the corpses, and in the end, he left evidence such as licenses that could tell the identities of the victims with the corpses.”

“So he did that on purpose?”

“If this is a murder due to impulse, it is impossible for him to act like this. I think Kujou’s speculation is correct.”

Crossing her arms, Yui supported Kujou.

“Then think about it, is there any meaning behind the fact that all people were murdered when they were eighteen?”

Finally understanding what the two were saying, Akira stated his opinion.

“From the state of the skeletonization of the corpses and the time of the notices for disappearing people... Jedi Aoki was murdered the first. Then Skull Yamaguchi. The third was Loveho Aida. The last was Arieru. If they were still

alive, their ages would be twenty, nineteen, eighteen, and eighteen respectively.”

“What about it?”

Akira asked hysterically because he didn’t understand what Kujou had said.

Kujou’s lowered the tone of his voice.

“Listen Akira. The actual ages of the victims are different. But they were all killed when they were eighteen. This is a key for searching the offender. ”

Attracted by Kujou’s voice, Akira became nervous.

“Two years ago, when the offender murdered Jedi Aoki, who was at the age of eighteen, the murderer had buried him. Because at that time, Arieru Shimizu, the last target, was only sixteen year old. In order to kill all victims when they were eighteen, the murderer had to continue burying the corpses.”

“...What the heck... So, the offender waited two years for that murdering opportunity!?”

“That’s how strong the hatred... You can feel from the murderer”

Feeling the hatred, which had continued for two years, from the murderous criminal, Akira shuddered and couldn’t speak.

A moment of silence descended upon the detective agency.

However, Yui, who had not been talking until now, broke the silence.

“So the items buried with the corpses are a message to somebody?”

“Whether it’s a message or a hint... It must have some sort of meaning; however, we don’t know who it’s for. There’s probably another similarity that we don’t know.”

“I see...”

While saying that, Yui closed her eyes.

“Miss Yui, it’s late now. I think we can stop here for today. Also, I will contact Mr. Gen later. If I receive the permission from you, I will go investigate Aida’s

and Yamaguchi's families soon. I might be able to obtain more information."

After hearing this, Yui nodded as granting permission.

"Akira, you have to keep monitoring Twitter. The offender had done so much until now. There is a possibility that the murderer won't stop here."

"Since I don't have to go to school during Golden Week, I'll do it for sure!"

Akira showed his enthusiasm because the job was entrusted to him. He continued to talk.

"Ah! So, during this break, can I stay in the agency? I have already told my parents!!"

Akira smiled innocently, without any fear.

"Sure. The doghouse ³ from last time is probably still there"

"Do you want me to add a quilt for you?"

Kujou and Yui laughed emulously.

"Wait! This conversation seemed to happen a long time agoooooooo—!!"

Akira's yelling was engulfed by the darkness of the night.

1. Telops – television opaque projectors, which are bolded words or graphics on the TV screen when the Japanese programs are broadcasted. They sometimes act like subtitles, but are only used to emphasize certain words or phrases, so there are not necessary telops corresponding to every single word."[↩]

2. Golden Week – a number of Japanese holidays from April 29 to May 5.[↩]

3. Doghouse from last time – Kujou had built a wooden doghouse in Volume 1 Episode 2 of The Fräulein of Hakoniwa, the manga version of KKDB.[↩]

8

Several days later.

The sluggish, low clouds covered up the sky from morning onward. Large

raindrops fell from the sky.

Meanwhile, Kujou visited the Aida family in Shimotsuma as an investigator, working on Genjiro's background work.

Masahiko Aida, forty-seven years old.

He had been working at a small sheet-metal plant at a suburb of Shimotsuma for twenty-eight years.

He had a firm body possibly suited for sports and a simple personality.

Walking through the 6-tatami [1](#) mat sized living room with timeworn tatami mats, Kujou went straight to the point after introducing himself.

“According to our information, Loveho did not have any delinquency history or arrest records. So I want to ask about her relationship with others. How was she at school? ”

“Our Loveho was a girl who was so excellent that she wasn't like us two at all. What was it... Oh— I remember that she was the vice president of the student council. I heard that she was very popular.”

Masahiko spoke straightforwardly, but with loneliness at the end.

“So she wouldn't cause people to hate her with her actions, right? From what you have just said, no one would bully her as well.”

“Of course not. If anything like that happened, I would not forgive the bully easily.”

While saying that, Masahiko flexed his arm and slapped his expanded muscles with his other hand.

“Then have you heard from your daughter that she kept in contact or knew the other victims of this series of cases, including Miss Arieru Shimizu, Mr. Jedi Aoki, and Mr. Skull Yamaguchi?”

Kujou set the short account, which included every victim's picture and name, onto the table.

“Oh, oh, oh! They all have cool names—!!”

A smile appeared on Masahiko's face as he became entranced by it.

“Ah— But I don’t know them at all. Oh! I remembered something.”

He took the papers and slowly stood up.

“I’ll ask Maya to take a look at it.”

“Ms. Maya? Oh. Is she your wife?”

“Oh, right! She is such a beautiful woman. Mr. Kujou, do you want to meet her? Hmm?”

“Ah, no. I appreciate your kindness, but I think your wife must be quite sorrowful at the moment for losing her beloved daughter. I think it’s best for her to have some time to herself.”

Smiling gently, Kujou rejected kindly.

“Oh. Then please wait here for a second.”

After Masahiko had left, Kujou looked around in the living room.

The quiet living room where the subtle sound of rain could be heard had several family pictures of Masahiko, Maya, and Loveho with innocent smiles hanging on the wall.

“Such a friendly family...”

Kujou, who had let out a huge breath and closed his eyes, murmured idly.

“Well— She has no clue. Maya said she had never heard of them from our daughter and she did not know these names.”

“I see. Thank you for going out of your way to ask.”

“No, no, no. I have to apologize. Originally, Maya had to be present as well, but she usually avoids meeting with people. She rejected the interview regarding this case stubbornly. Although I’ve asked her if she wanted to show up since only you was here... Well... As I expected. Losing a beloved child... as a mother... is...”

Although Masahiko was a straightforward person, he noticed the feelings of

Maya and spoke with a bitter, apologetic smile.

“That’s totally fine. When other investigators visited the Shimizu family and Aoki family, the wives said that they were not willing to show up. I understand Mrs. Maya’s feelings.”

Saying this, Kujou bowed his head deeply.

“Sorry, police officer. I’m sorry that I wasn’t helpful.”

“No, no. Then, is it okay for me to ask a few more questions?”

After that, Kujou continued asking questions for almost an hour.

Did Loveho have any worries?

Do you recognize the number 1150, which was used in the Twitter username?

Or any ideas on the letters?

How is your relationship with your neighbors?

Are there any witnesses or rumors about suspicious people?

“Even subtle information regarding the offender will be helpful.” Although Kujou had said that repetitively, his endeavor ended fruitlessly.

It continued to rain stronger than before,

After bidding the Aida family farewell, Kujou headed to the next destination quickly.

Located on the west of the Bousou Peninsula, Kisarazu had an iron and steel street made up of the large ironworks gathered in the coastal areas.

Kujou’s destination, the Yamaguchi family household, home of the fourth victim, was located in the countryside of North Kisarazu.

There was a nameplate of Yamaguchi on a small, timeworn, wooden bungalow, which was probably built at the beginning of the Showa period [2](#).

Probably due to the intensifying wind and rain, there was nobody from the media there or at the Aida family household.

Kujou rang the bell on the door.

However, there was only silence besides the sound of rain.

After confirming that the electricity meter was still operating, Kujou rang the bell again.

However, same as the before, there were no indications of people beyond the door.

About to give up, Kujou rang the bell for the third time.

Immediately after that, there was a loud roar of a woman coming from the other side of the door.

“Stop it!! I actually heard it! I’ve already said that I declined to be interviewed!!”

Perplexed by the sudden trial, Kujou explained his reason slowly over the door.

“Mrs. Yamaguchi, you are home, right? I think you had been told yesterday. I am Kujou, an investigator of the case regarding the corpses under the cherry blossom trees. I came here today because I wanted to ask a few questions.”

“Ah? I made that promise?”

“Didn’t the Police Office of Kisarazu contacted you yesterday?”

“The Police Office of Kisarazu?”

The woman’s voice, which had calmed down slightly, raised up at the end of the sentence as if the woman was contemplating.

Immediately after that, there was a sound of the lock of the entrance being opened and the door slowly opened to the outside.

“Oh, sorry. I completely forgot about it.”

The giant woman who was wearing a gray jersey and holding a one sho bottle

3 of sake said calmly.

Her face, which had no makeup on, had dried tears remaining. Her eyes were very swollen.

From the inside of the widely opened entrance door, an extreme stink of alcohol flowed out to Kujou.

“Sorry for interrupting you when you were resting.”

“That’s okay... I wasn’t resting... Whatever. Isn’t it still raining? Come in.”

“Thank you.”

Kujou took off his shoes at a corner of the entrance, which had miscellaneous objects placed at, and walked through the squeaky, wooden hallway and the living room with beige carpet.

The woman who was holding a bottle of sake sat onto the carpet casually and crossed her legs. “Don!” She placed the one bottle of sake onto the table in front of her.

Kujou sat facing her.

When she saw that, she put the sake next to her mouth and drank a mouthful of it. She looked at Kujou with drunken eyes.

“So, who are you?”

“Sorry for forgetting to introduce myself. I am Koushirou Kujou, an investigator.”

“Oh, I see... Erika. I am Erika Yamaguchi.”

“So you are Skull Yamaguchi’s mother?”

“Right.” Erika nodded her head vigorously; she was totally drunk.

“Is your husband home today?”

“He had just left for work two or three days ago. Working on ironwork on that street is like that during busy seasons.”

“I... see. Are you okay with staying by yourself during this time period?”

Erika clicked her tongue.

“It’s not okay. That’s why I am drinking.”

Saying that, Erika drank the sake again.

“...I see... What you mean.”

After understanding Erika’s current status, Kujou murmured to himself as if he agreed.

“Okay, I will not take much of your time. Please answer as many questions as possible. ”

In order to answer the sorrow for a mother losing her child at the age over forty, Kujou asked the same questions regarding the victim’s relationship with his family members, friends, and people from his school and places around him detailedly.

However, the answers were pretty much same as that of Aida family before. The more questions he asked, the more Kujou was able to tell that Skull Yamaguchi was an excellent student and that he was born in a family with good relationships.

When Kujou asked about the Twitter username, she seemed to have no clue at all.

After asking all the questions, Kujou looked at his notes, worried.

Every single child tried their best in studying and clubs; every single one enjoyed their school life with people admiring them.

He could not find any fault about the four victims.

Wait... What if... Something had happened a long time ago...

Although Kujou was stuck, a brand-new possibility might reveal the answer.

“Police, can we stop here?”

Realizing that he was contemplating in other’s house, Kujou turned his face to Erika.

“No, I am sorry. I was thinking about other things...”

“Oh, really. Do it at your home.”

Saying that, Erika stood up and headed to the kitchen.

In order to leave, Kujou stood up as well.

“Mrs. Erika, you are mentally strong.”

“What?”

Erika answered only with voice, she was searching in her refrigerator.

“Mrs. Maya from the Aida family and the wives from the other two families were ailing and could not help with the investigation.”

Erika’s hand stopped when she heard that word.

“What had you... just said?”

“They could not help with the investigation...”

“I’m not asking for that. The name! What was her name!?”

“Mrs. Maya?”

When Erika heard the name “Maya,” she turned her face around in a hurry.

“Ma... ya... Maya... You mean Maya Urakawa!?”

“No, not her. She is Maya Aida, the wife from the Aida family.”

Although Erika was thrown into a panic, after she realized that it was her misunderstanding, she continued searching in the refrigerator as if nothing had happened.

Kujou stared at her so that he would not miss a single movement of her. He left the Yamaguchi family with a satisfied smile.

At the time when Kujou got onto a train in order to return to the detective agency, the sun had already set and the windows of the train reflected the darkness of outside, which was lacking street lights. From the sound of rain dropping onto the window, he could tell that the rain had become stronger than before.

Since it was Golden Week, the train was sparsely populated. The guy sitting near him appeared to be a high schooler. He was tapping her phone screen intently.

“... A puzzle game?”

Hearing Kujou’s murmur, that student turned his head to Kujou.

“Do you play this game? If you do, please add me as your friend.”

He was not angry at all even Kujou had interrupted him. He started the conversation casually.

“Ah, no... I am sorry. I don’t play that game. It was just because puzzle games sound very familiar to me.”

That student showed the screen to Kujou, who smiled apologetically, and demonstrated.

“If you use your finger to move the balls with different colors like this, the balls with same the color will stick together and disappear..”

While explaining that, he moved his finger dexterously and eliminated several balls with the same color in a row.

“Hum. You are really good at this.”

The student did not stop explaining to Kujou, who leaked out some admiration in his voice. After recommending Kujou to play the game, he returned to his own world.

When Kujou slightly closed his eyes, inside his eyelids, the balls with different colors moved up and down, sometimes exchanging positions with the balls next to them. An image of a difficult puzzle game being solved easily left a deep impression on him.

It was the time when the balls exchanged positions with the ones to their left and right for several times.

“... I, I see... Exchanging positions.”

At the moment, Kujou had an epiphany. The corners of his mouth became an

arc.

“You!!”

Being called so suddenly, the student turned to Kujou with a surprised facial expression.

“Thank you. You helped a lot.”

Saying that, Kujou smiled.

1. 6-tatami mat sized – approximately 9.93 m².↵
2. Showa period – From December 25, 1926 to January 7, 1989.↵
3. One sho bottle – a glass bottle that contains liquids in Japan. Its volume is about 1,800 mL.↵

9

“What time do you plan to sleep to? Get up, kid.”

Kujou’s voice, along with his silent wrath, was engulfed by the atmosphere of the room empty.

In the quiet room in which only the breathing of a sleeping person could be heard, Kujou’s facial expression turned into that of a demon silently.

And then that demon covered the sleeping Akira’s face, which was filled with so much happiness that made him seem like he was in a paradise, with a wet towel secretly.

Thirty seconds later.

“Hah, co... Co, cough... Buh... Buaaah–!!”

Blowing off the wet towel, Akira jumped up vigorously.

“Wh, What!? What have you done!?... Cough. Something went into my throat.”

Saying that, he discovered the towel, which was wet with water, lying beside

him and opened his mouth widely.

“What... You are still alive...”

“This shows nothing but murderous intent! This towel!!”

Contrary to Akira’s will, his mind became sober because he had to comment fiercely on Kujou, who had an extremely regretful facial expression, from an early morning.

“Have you forgotten what we had discussed last night? That since I was back too late last night, everyone was going participate in a meeting this morning.”

“Oh, right. Umm, eh? It’s already the time for that!?”

“Honestly... You’re such a carefree person. Come to the dining room after you change your clothes. Everyone is already here. Hurry up.”

After saying that to Akira, Kujou left the room swiftly.

A while after that, Akira came to the dining room hastily in a T-shirt and a pair of jeans.

“What!? Mr. Gen is already here?”

“A police officer is good at getting up early.”

Saying that, Genjirou yawned loudly.

Akira greeted Yui and sat onto the empty chair beside her.

“Mr. Gen, how are the recent actions of the police?”

In order to make the brains of all the people more active, Kujou poured some strong chai tea into shiny, white teacups for them, then asked.

“It has been several days since the fourth body was found, but we still don’t even have a picture of the offender. Since the crime scenes are mostly located in the Kanto region, every office is getting a special security system and reinforcing in vigilance during patrol. So, the headquarter has even fewer people and is busy with focusing on Twitter now.”

“Aren’t you being forestalled completely?”

Yui gave a surprised facial expression.

“The~re~fore. I need your help. By the way, I am now negotiating with the higher ups. If everything goes will, I will become part of the investigation headquarter.”

Smiling arrogantly, Genjirou drank the chai tea Kujou handed to him.

“Oh, by the way, it’s about Twitter. I feel like there has been nothing noticeable since then. The amount of fake tweets did not decrease as usual, as well as the number people who tried to dig the trees, but the real offender has not posted anything. ”

Receiving the report from Akira, Kujou drank the chai tea and spoke with a confident voice.

“About that... There won’t be any more corpses. That’s it.”

“Eh? Wh, wh, what!?”

The three turned their heads to Kujou at the same time.

“The offender of this case spent a period of two years to murder men and women who were eighteen years old one by one. In order to carry out his murderous intent behind this case, the offender laid a plan scrupulously. However, what caught my eye was the reason of him burying the items with the corpses. If he only wanted to murder them, he could have thrown away everything that could reveal the identities of the corpses.”

“That means the offender wanted us to know the identities of the corpses?”

Kujou nodded at Genjirou, who had a skeptical attitude towards the offender.

“Then, let’s return to the topic. I have said ‘That’s it.’ I will explain it. Akira, bring me the piece of paper and the pen over there.”

Akira handed over the piece of paper and the pen placed on the table to Kujou as he had been told.

“The Tweets which indicate the locations of the corpses were all tweeted by accounts that have peculiar usernames.”

Hearing that, Akira wrote down the letters and numbers onto the paper, which were @ROK_1150, @ADO_1150, @SAGE_1150, and @GIA_1150.

“According to the inference before, the letters are initials and the number 1150 has other meanings. However, this is easier than we thought. The positions of the underscores are serving different purposes in the usernames.”

The four focused on the letters and numbers on the paper.

“The numbers after the underscores are just indicating that these accounts belong to the same offender. What’s noticeable are the letters before that.”

Encouraged by Kujou’s confident words, Akira wrote ROK, ADO, SAGE, and GIA without the numbers.

“ROKADOSAGEGIA... Rokadosagegia? ”

“That is such a model answer. I’m about to cry.”

“Wh!? Then, then, how should it be pronounced?”

Realizing that he had been humiliated, Akira asked fiercely.

“The is the order the victims were found. It means nothing to the offender.”

“... I see. It’s the order of the actual murder”

“Pon,” Yui clapped her hands.

Hearing that, Akira wrote as what Yui had said in order to redeem his good name.

“The first one was Jedi, then Skull, Loveho, and Arieru. ADOGIASAGEROK... Adogiasagerok?”

“Even an idiot is worth respecting. Read it backwards.”

Hearing Kujou’s voice, which contained a sigh, Akira hastily read the letters backwards.

“KOREGASAIGODA... This will be the last one?”

“Right. This is the message from the offender for sure.”

“That’s why you said ‘That’s it.’ Hah~ Amazing!”

Genjirou praised as if he was admiring Kujou from his heart.

“According to this, the offender did not choose the victims indiscriminately. There must be some meanings of choosing them.”

“I know!! It’s about shiny names!”

“Go die!!”

Kicking away Akira’s childish inference, Kujou squinted at the disheartened Akira, regained control and continued speaking.

“Since this offender has determined murderous intent, the action of murder must have meanings. That means, the action of revealing the identities of the corpses must have meanings as well.”

“That means, the offender wanted the victims’ family members and friends to know that... But why? Is it because the offender had a sense of guilt after murdering the victims, so the offender wanted at least to send the corpses back to their parents? ”

Kujou closed his eyes and sighed once at Genjiro’s question.

Silence dominated the room.

Every single person was waiting for Kujou’s next sentence.

And then, Kujou slightly opened his mouth.

“This offender... does not have that kind of compassion... What he has are only... hatred, murderous intent, and the desire of vengeance.”

“... The desire of vengeance?”

The word vengeance seemed to have triggered Yui’s thought.

“Yesterday, when I went to the family of Yamaguchi, the fourth victim, Mrs. Erika, Skull’s mother, had an odd reaction at the word ‘Mrs. Maya.’”

“Umm? Who is Mrs. Maya?”

“Maya Aida. That is the name of Loveho Aida’s mother. However, at that time, when Mrs. Erika heard Mrs. Maya, she asked me if that was ‘Maya Urakawa.’”

“Maya Urakawa? Who is she? How does she relate to this case!?”

Both Genjirou and Akira became confused. The times for them to rack their brains increased.

“The cause and effect of the past... Thinking about that, I trapped Mrs. Erika. Her reaction was beyond my expectation. And then, after I arrived at this house last night, I searched up a lot of stuff on the Internet.”

“Then, what have you found out!?”

Kujou shook his head regretfully at Genjirou’s question, which was filled with expectations.

“There was nothing on the Internet about that from present to the past that it could be reached. However, that’s what I had expected. In the world around twenty years ago, the Internet barely spread among people. People obtain information mainly from news and magazines.”

“What!? Twenty years ago!?”

“Right. Because of something that happened about twenty years ago, the offender had to perform this series of murders.”

“Ex... Excuse me... Wait, Kyuu¹. Although I finally understood what you were talking about earlier completely, I’m lost again.”

The face of Genjirou, who requested for a detailed explanation, was distorted due to bewilderment.

Speaking to Akira, he suddenly laid on the table and convulsed as the circuitry of his brain experienced a short out.

“Then, let’s talk about something else that relates to this. In this world, it is pretty difficult to publicly change the first name chosen by parents or the last name passed down through generations. However, there are cases such as the entertainers using stage names for business. And then, I looked up the name ‘Maya Urakawa.’ A stage name or a professional name, it should be one of them... However, it was neither of them.”

Kujou’s confidence and persuasiveness increased in his voice as he was going to hit the point.

“There is a way to change a first name publicly... No, to change a last name.

Especially for females.”

Having noticed what Kujou was about to say, Yui opened her eyes widely.

“I see! Getting married!!”

“That’s right. Miss Yui.”

“So, Maya Aida’s maiden name is Maya Urakawa!?”

“I think that’s correct.”

On another piece of paper placed on the table, Kujou wrote down Maya Urakawa, Erika Yamaguchi, the Shimizu family, and the Aoki family.

“From Mrs. Erika’s reaction, she probably knows Mrs. Maya. And then, from the relationship of this case, I think all the mothers know each other.”

“I see. If it’s about the husbands, since the names of the husbands wouldn’t change, the police would have probably obtained some information; however, since the wives’ name were totally changed, so the possibility of missing some information is high.”

Understanding Kujou’s thought, Yui added on.

“Then according to Kyuu’s inference, the case relating to the motivation of the offender happened around twenty years ago and it related to Maya Urakawa?”

“Yes, that’s right.”

There was no cloudiness on the face of Genjirou, who was very confident.

“The maiden names of the mothers... Well, it is actually a blind point. Okay, I’ll investigate Maya Urakawa in the police’s data. It will stand out if she had done anything. I’ll investigate the maiden name of the other three mothers as well.”

“I am counting on you. We should find the silhouette from the mothers of the four.”

“Of course. No problem. Then, I’ll investigate about it.”

Genjirou raised his hand as a response to Kujou, who bowed down deeply, and quickly walked out of the detective agency.

In the dining room, which became quiet since the meeting was over, Kujou and Yui squinted at Akira, whose brain was still experiencing a short out, and were waiting for the direct confrontation with the offender. Determination appeared on their faces again.

1. Kyuu – Kujou’s nickname. In Japanese, the Kanji of ku also has the pronunciation of kyuu.[↩](#)

10

The contact from Genjirou, who had been investigating the database of the police, came several days after that meeting.

The maiden names of the mothers of the four people who were murdered were found immediately.

The maiden name of Aki Shimizu, the mother of Arieru Shimizu, was Aki Komiyama; the maiden name of Kotomi Aoki, the mother of Jedi Aoki, was Kotomi Morisaki. And the maiden name of Erika Yamaguchi was Erika Shinozuka. Including Maya Urakawa, the four people were all forty-three years old.

And as Kujou had speculated, a case happened before connected the four people.

Twenty-five years ago, a suicide due to bullying occurred in a public high school in Atsugi, Kanagawa Prefecture.

Yukiko Nagase, the victim, was discovered dead from hanging herself on a branch of a cherry blossom tree located in Mount Kuro to the north of Kawaguchi Lake in Yamanashi Prefecture with a rope at the age of eighteen.

The four people who bullied Yukiko were Aki Komiyama, Kotomi Morisaki, Maya Urakawa, and Erika Shinozuka.

Aki Komiyama and Maya Urakawa, who were the major culprits, received prison sentences for five years at a women’s prison. Kotomi Morisaki and Erika

Shinozuka were sent to a women's reformatory for two years.

After reading the documents handed to him by Kujou, Akira knew that this case had a background of a suicide due to gruesome bullying and bit down his back teeth.

"Hey, Kujou. If this is the beginning of this case regarding the corpses under cherry blossom trees, then the offender... is someone who is related to Miss Yukiko... Right?"

Kujou, who was walking in front of Akira, replied quietly without turning back.

"Oh. Mrs, Tomoko, the mother of Miss Yukiko, has already passed away. That means..."

Hearing that, the facial expression of Yui, who was walking by Kujou, slightly darkened.

There was a decrepit Japanese house which seemed to be built a long time ago in front of the three, who were speechless.

Chofu, Tokyo.

A corner of a quiet residential area.

The sunlight of the tilted setting sun gave the gigantic sky and Tama River a rosy hue.

Right beside the levee, a house with a nameplate of "Nagase" was built.

"This is... The house of Miss Yukiko Nagase."

Akira's stiffened murmur could be heard.

"Actually, this is the house of Mr. Takeshi Nagase."

Kujou's voice was way too calm.

"Hey, Kujou. Are we okay without the help of Mr. Gen? Umm, because... If everything is like what you've said, then the offender is in here, isn't he?"

"Mr. Gen will come here immediately after he finishes dealing with a sudden

case. Don't worry... Plus."

Saying that, Kujou placed his finger onto the bell.

"This offender... does not have any intentions of escaping."

The button which was rarely pressed caused the sound of the bell to echo in the old house.

Whether he was determined or not, Akira swallowed his saliva.

Silence dominated the place.

The entrance, which was not lit up, of the Nagase house, became a shade darker due to the shadow of the levee.

It was when Kujou pressed down the bell for the second time in order to inform the offender of their presence.

The frosted glass of the entrance reflected the shadow of a person. Then that shadow opened the door.

The person who appeared in front of the dark entrance was an aged, tall man with black and white hair mixed together.

The man, whose mustache was taken care of perfectly was in a white shirt and a pair of jeans, asked in a slow tone gently.

"Who are you?"

Hearing that, Kujou bowed down.

"I apologize for coming in a busy day. I am Kujou, an investigator. You are Takeshi Nagase, right?"

The man who looked slightly surprised smiled and welcomed the three into his house.

The man led them passed through a dark hallway and went into the Buddhist family chapel on the left.

The fluorescent lights were turned on at the same time with the sound of the switch.

After letting them sit on the opposite side of a big table, the man faced them backwards, putting his hands together and rang the rin¹ in front of the Buddhist altar.

“My wife passed away twenty-three years ago. I’m the only one who lives here, so please feel free.”

Saying that, the man sat down in front of them.

“You are Mr.Kujou, right? I am Takeshi Nagase. Thank you for coming here.”

“No, I should apologize for coming here so suddenly.”

Yui and Akira watched the quiet confrontation of the two silently.

“So the reason for you to come here is about... my only daughter, Yukiko?”

Takeshi was the one who started the conversation first.

Yui and Akira were surprised that he went straight to the point.

However, Kujou was extremely calm.

“Right. The serial corpse abandonment case. The so-called the case regarding the corpses under the cherry blossom trees. I think the offender is... Mr. Takeshi. I think it’s you.”

“Hmm... Why do you think that?”

“Miss Yukiko committed suicide because of the bullying from Aki Komiyama, Kotomi Morisaki, Maya Urakawa, and Erika Shinozuka. You experienced extreme sorrow. You preached about the inhuman actions of the four perpetrators during the interviews for TV shows, magazines, and newspaper articles. This was very effective and people were standing by your side. Everyone thought the result of the trial would be a heavy sentence.”

At that time, Kujou crossed his arms in front of his face and pulled his chin in.

“However, the justice was different. Since the perpetrators were still minors, they demanded penalties that were much lighter than that of adults. When you knew that they could not be sanctioned by the law because they were protected by the Juvenile Act, your desire of vengeance continued to grow.”

Takeshi listened to Kujou silently while facing downwards.

“Mrs. Tomoko, your wife, probably became ill because Miss Yukiko passed away. And unfortunately, she passed away as well. There was that kind of record in the documents of the police.”

Kujou’s facial expression became slightly depressed when he mentioned Tomoko.

“After that, you continued your everyday life normally. As the time passed, the case of Miss Yukiko gradually faded out from people’s memory. Therefore, the purpose of this case is to inform the world of that case again and to take revenge.”

Takeshi could not take his eyes off of Kujou, who stated everything clearly.

“You... talked about twenty-five of my years... that easily.”

Both arms of Takushi, who murmured as if he was pondering the meaning of the words, trembled slightly.

“Yukiko was... such an adorable daughter. She was a lively, sociable, and intelligent daughter who made me feel proud of... Even she became a high schooler, she frequently called me ‘Dad, Dad.’”

Saying that, Takeshi turned back to the Buddhist altar and looked at the photo of females who were probably Tomoko and Yukiko placed on the altar.

“We enjoyed being together since Yukiko was a kid... Oh, Yukiko loved mountain-climbing. She had climbed various mountains in the past. Especially during the season of cherry blossoms, she had to climb mountains... Plus, she said she wanted to become a doctor in the future. She said if she could become a doctor, she would make us live long...”

Large drops of tears fell down from Takeshi’s eyes, which were looking at the three straightforwardly.

“And those sluts... appeared in front of my daughter... It was when Yukiko became a sophomore in high school. One day, she came home with cuts on her cheeks. She said that she fell down in a club activity... However, eventually, the times that she came home with cuts on her legs and bruises on her arms increased. I thought that was way too strange, so I asked my wife to talk to her... But... She said nothing...”

Wet by his tears, Takeshi bit down onto his back teeth and slightly started trembling.

“A few days after that, I noticed that... Money disappeared from my wallet little by little. I thought it might be Yukiko, so I talked to her with my wife. And then she apologized with tears, ‘I am sorry. I just need a little more pocket money. I am really sorry.’”

The two hands, which were held so strongly together that they were bleeding, Takeshi put on the table trembled little by little.

“Those perpetrators asked Yukiko for money, and she could only obey them with tears.”

“However, I... I wanted to trust my daughter. So I increased the amount of her pocket money... But.. That was... a fault... The amount of money that they were asking for... increased to what Yukiko could not afford by herself.”

“Yukiko gave the amount of money they demanded, but the amount that they demanded increased every day. When the time for Yukiko to be unable to afford it came, she decided to commit suicide before making problems for parents because she had no other choice....”

Staring at Takeshi, who was dominated by anger that transformed from sorrow, Kujou listened to him calmly.

“Yukiko wrote everything about the bullying from the four people on her farewell note.”

Takeshi hit the table strongly with his fist.

“The sluts who were in the same class as Yukiko! They asked my daughter to run errands for them since they were in tenth grade²! They also drew on her table and stole her belongings. Eventually, their bullying escalated into violence!! ”

“Eh!? But you can tell that from the scratches and bruises very quick.”

Akira, who had been listening without talking until now, spoke without thinking.

“Those sluts!! In order for their violent actions not to expose, they first used

violence on the chest, stomach, and parts that can be covered by clothing continuously!!”

“That’s... so mean...”

Akira lost his tongue because of the inhumane, violent actions.

“They punched her based on whether or not she paid the money! And they raised the amount of money they demanded!! Yukiko... had no other way to go.”

Anger and sorrow mixed together on Takeshi’s face and smudged it with tears and snot.

“I feel sorry for you. They should be sanctioned by the law because of their exposed violent actions and blackmail.”

Trying to feel the heart of Takeshi, Yui urged him to speak gently.

“Of course... The four were arrested by police immediately after that. The case was reported sensationally to society. A lot of interviews from TV and magazines came to me. At that time, I wanted to dispel my daughter’s resentment, so I even took out her farewell note and spoke passionately about how inhumane the actions they had done to my daughter were! I talked!! I preached!! After hearing that, the public opinion stood by my side!! I was so sure that I could clear my daughter’s resentment!! ”

Takeshi opened his hands widely and raise them towards the ceiling in a facial expression charged with emotions.

However, in the next moment, his eyes became so void that nothing could be reflected from his eyes.

“... However, the result of the trial was nothing but a trash.”

And Takeshi’s heart was engulfed by hatred furiously at once.

“An outdated relic called the Juvenile Act killed my daughter again! They were minors, so what!! They killed a person but they could be put in jail for five years at most!? Don’t talk nonsense, that execrable judge!! He protected the human rights of the people who had deprived others of human rights!!”

He tapped the table fiercely and yelled at the top of his voice. His gentleness,

which was seen at the entrance earlier, could not be seen from him now.

“How could murderers be released from the jail that quickly just because they were minors!? How could they return to their comfortable normal life after they were released!? That’s why I was thinking about killing all of the four sluts after they were released!!... I was thinking about it... But I gave up.”

Takeshi could not control his feelings anymore. A trace of a smile of ecstasy appeared on his face, which was filled with anger until now.

“My wife, Tomoko, passed away two years before the first slut was released... She died because of her extreme sorrow from Yukiko’s death... This is how bad it is for a mother to lose her child... So I thought... It meant nothing to them if I just kill them right after they were released. A person will not suffer after he passes away... Just like what we had suffered, I wanted them to experience the same suffering until the sufferings were imprinted on their hearts!! I was thinking about how to reach that goal!! ”

“That’s why you have been waiting for twenty-five years.”

On the face of the man, who was satisfied by Kujou’s answer, was filled with insanity, smiling.

The murderous intent that was almost madness.

The desire of vengeance of a man whose daughter was deprived was beyond Yui and Akira’s thoughts. They could feel the shiver that almost made their hands sweat.

“Then Mr. Takeshi Nagase, can I take the conversation until now as your confession of this series of cases?”

Kujou was very calm.

However, there was no reply.

In front of the eyes of the three, Takeshi, who seemed to have aged for another twelve years, sat with a face looking like evil spirits had just been exorcised from him.

Then the man slowly opened his mouth.

“Today is the tenth of May... Mr. Kujou, what time is it?”

“A little over twenty o’clock.”

Kujou checked his watch and answered.

Whether Takeshi was listening or not, he started another conversation.

“Speaking of the desire of vengeance, using Twitter was so difficult to use for an old man. Mr. Kujou, are you the one who noticed the usernames?”

“Right. Taking out the letters and arranged them into the order of which the victims were murdered, they will become the message, ‘This will be the last one.’”

“Taking out the... letters.”

Takeshi murmured.

Although Kujou thought that response was suspicious, Takeshi took an action first.

“Then Mr. Kujou, good bye.”

Immediately after Takeshi had said that, white smoke came out from the bottom of the table suddenly.

“Ah!? Wh, What is this!?”

Becoming flustered at this sudden incident, Akira inhaled a large amount of smoke and coughed.

Kujou covered Yui’s mouth with a sleeve of his clothes right away and dragged her to his side. He used the other hand to cover his own mouth and looked around in the house, which became misty due to this white smoke.

However, in the Buddhist family chapel, which was enveloped by the smoke, Kujou was unable to find the man.

“Ehh... Miss Yui, let’s leave this house for now. Akira, you are here, right!? Follow me tightly!”

“Alright.”

Thus, the three successfully escaped through the entrance while breathing

feebly.

“Who said it... That this offender does not have the intention to escape!!”

Akira complained while coughing.

“No way... It was beyond my expectations. I thought that Takeshi had finished everything, so he wanted someone to arrest him.”

“Well, I think it’s fine, since we are all safe.”

Yui did not think this was anyone’s fault. She patted the white powder on her clothing.

“Seriously... In order to escape, he even prepared the smoke, he has absolutely no determination to be arrested.”

What caused Akira to complain was now Takeshi instead of Kujou.

“... Determination...”

Kujou’s thought was triggered by Akira’s word.

“This is the last sentence... that man left off.”

“What? Kujou, what are you murmuring about?”

It was the moment when Akira, who slightly calmed down, looked into the face of Kujou, who was facing downwards.

“Oh!! I know what’s going on!!”

Suddenly, Kujou raised his head, and cause Akira to take a pratfall.

However, Kujou did not even glance at Akira, but took his phone out and began a call.

After three calling sounds, an optimistic voice leaked out from the speaker.

“Hey, Kyuu³!! How is it going? Have you caught him?”

“Mr. Gen! Where are you now?”

“Oh, oh, sorry. I happened to be late when I went out. I’ll probably be there after about twenty minutes.”

“I failed to catch the offender.”

“Wh, What!?”

Since Genjirou knew that it was extremely rare for Kujou to use the phrase ‘failed to catch,’ Genjirou was very surprised.

“So, so, so!? Where is his destination!?”

“It’s okay. I have an idea. Mr. Gen, please come to pick us up as soon as possible. We don’t have time. I will explain to you in your car.”

Saying that, Kujou ended the call. The emotion of impatience appeared on Kujou’s face, which was unusual.

Thirty minutes later, they met Genjirou. Their car moved towards Yamanashi on the Chuuou Expressway⁴.

“Oh, I see. Fortunately, the moon is full today, so I think it will be okay if we are careful. Thank you for agreeing my unreasonable request this suddenly... Right. I will tell Mr. Genjirou as well... Bye.”

Sitting on the assistant driver’s seat, Kujou had just finished a call with an investigator from the investigation headquarter.

“So, what did he say?”

“The place where Miss Yukiko passed away was actually a place off the side of a teahouse at the trailhead of Misaka Mountain”

“Hey, hey. Is it okay to go into the mountains at midnight?”

“Since I asked him to send the GPS data just in case, I think we will be fine”

Genjirou slightly sneered at Kujou’s perfect answer.

“By the way, Kujou, why do you know Mr. Takeshi is heading to the cherry blossom tree where Miss Yukiko passed away?”

“Since the correct meaning of that message is ‘On May eleventh, this will be the last one.’ And May eleventh is also the day Miss Yukiko passed away.”

“Death anniversary... What did he want to do on her death anniversary?”

Probably Genjirou and Yui had already slightly noticed it. They stared at the street lights outside the car windows silently.

“Akira, have you said anything about Mr. Takeshi’s determination when you escaped from the Nagase house?”

“Yeah, I’ve said that.”

“He was determined from the beginning.”

“Eh?”

Kujou organized his words with a little bit of loneliness.

“Mr. Takeshi Nagase... decided to die under the same tree... on Miss Yukiko’s death anniversary.”

After understanding everything, Akira lost his tongue and sunk into the back of a passenger seat deeply.

After that, no one had spoken until the car arrived at the teahouse at a mountain pass on Misaka Mountain.

In the deep mountains, nothing besides the cries of birds and bugs could be heard. The four climbed along the dark mountain road while sweating.

The light of the full moon upon their heads lighted lit up the dark mountain road from the top.

Although the four were walking according to the GPS information, it took them an extremely long period of time since they were not used to walking along the mountain road at night.

“Hey, Kujou... Is this actually the right way?”

Akira, whose breathing became rough, started complaining to Kujou because they were still on their way.

“If you have the strength to talk, then walk forward. Otherwise, you are welcome to return right now by yourself.”

Akira probably understood that as long as the flashlights were holding by Genjirou and Kujou, he would not have the right to reject. He seemed to move

forward silently.

Immediately after that.

The dense and thick trees, which had seemed like they were blocking the way of the four, disappeared and the view of the four suddenly became broad.

When they realized, they were already at the top of the slightly elevated mountain.

There the trees were sparse. The gigantic cherry blossom tree standing in the middle was in the spotlight.

Although it was a hazakura⁵ with all petals already fallen down, it was a *Prunus × yedoensis*⁶ with a thick trunk and a nice shape of branches. It was lit by the moonlight of the full moon.

Suddenly arriving at the destination, Akira was fascinated by that sacred cherry blossom tree. In the next moment, he pointed to that tree with his voice raised slightly.

Kujou, Yui, and Genjirou followed the direction of Akira's finger.

Over there...

Takeshi Nagase was hung with a rope from a thick branch of the cherry blossom tree. He was blown by the wind coming up the mountain and slowly swayed with the petals that were blown up from the ground.

No one was able to move while looking at that captivating, suspicious, but glamorous scene, which could even cause them to forget to breathe.

No, it was a scene which gave them the illusion that if they moved, they would destroy this artwork.

“On May eleventh, this will be the last one...”

The watch of Kujou, who murmured with a voice that was too low for anyone

to hear, pointed at five past twelve.

1. Rin – a small bell used in a Japanese Buddhist ceremony.↵
2. Tenth grade – the first year of high school in Japan.↵
3. Kyuu – Kujou’s nickname. In Japanese, the Kanji of ku also has the pronunciation of kyuu.↵
4. Chuuou Expressway – a national expressway owned and operated by Central Nippon Expressway Company in Japan.↵
5. Hazakura – a stage of a cherry blossom tree when its leaves start to appear. “Ha” means “leaf” or “leaves” and “zakura,” or “sakura,” means cherry blossom trees. The leaves of cherry blossom trees grow out after the petals fall off.↵
6. *Prunus × yedoensis* – a hybrid cherry of between *Prunus speciosa* as father plant and *Prunus pendula* f. *ascendens* as mother.↵

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The next day, all TV news programs were reporting the case regarding the corpses buried under cherry blossom trees, which had progressed suddenly.

The true face of the vicious offender who murdered four teens.

Revealing the whole picture of Takeshi Nagase and the case.

For example, although there were a lot of programs revealing the offender, who had disturbed the society, they were altered with the passing of time. Within three days, the name of the case became “The Revenge Play after Twenty-five Years.”

And although the suspects were protected by the Juvenile Act twenty-five years ago and the transmission ability of information was low at that time, and the personal information of the suspects were kept secret before, it was different now.

The personal information of the four people who put Yukiko Nagase onto the road of suicide was exposed continuously everywhere.

Their names at that time were exposed, the details of bullying were leaked

out, and even their addresses and phone numbers were revealed to the public.

And the interest of the general public focused on the four housewives, who put a person onto the road of suiciding but lived a normal life happily after that.

“Hey, Kujou. So Mr. Takeshi’s revenge was successful?”

In the dining room of the detective agency, Akira asked while drinking the bitter Darjeeling tea.

“Well, I think so. He returned his suffer and hatred in their entirety. There are no methods better than this. Plus, he also ensnared the mothers who are still alive. It was probably a perfect result to him.”

“Umm, but could a normal person kill innocent children in order to make their mothers experience the same suffering that he had?”

Akira asked because he could understand what Kujou was saying, but could not understand it emotionally.

“It wasn’t about can or cannot. Takeshi Nagase did it... Probably his desire of vengeance was that strong... I guess that was the feeling of one’s child being deprived by others.”

Kujou sighed in a lonely manner and closed his eyes.

As if she was to add onto it, Yui opened her mouth.

“Crimes are changing over time. In recent years, especially the juvenile delinquency is deteriorating in ways that could not be seen. And I think the laws are completely mistaken for the personal information that should be protected.”

“What do you mean?”

“It is the same now as it was back then that when minors commit heinous murders, the victims are reported with their real names, while avoiding the real names of the perpetrators. I feel like they think that the lives of the dead have ended but the offenders who are still alive should be respected. Well, this not only applies to the Juvenile Act. I think for most cases, the judges in general judge that if someone dies, his life ends... I can hear the voices of the souls of

the dead. That's probably why I think they are lonely and deserve empathy."

Saying that, Yui closed her eyes like Kujou had done.

Akira used the chair to support himself and stared at the ceiling blankly.

... After a while...

"... Mr. Takeshi, Mrs. Tomoko, and Yukiko. Are they happy for being together on that side?"

Akira's voice contained sorrow.

Hearing that question, Kujou opened his eye. He said that this was told by Mr. Gen and continued.

"Before Mr. Takeshi ended his life, he sprinkled the ashes of Miss Yukiko and Mrs. Tomoko under that cherry blossom tree."

"Eh... Then, at that time... The petals blown from the ground that we've seen..."

Yui slowly opened her eyes and smiled.

"Probably the two... were welcoming him."

Triggered by that sentence, Kujou and Akira smiled as well.

"... I see..."

With Akira's pleasant but sorrowful words, the curtains of a revenge play which cost a man twenty-five years were drawn to a close.

Epilogue

“Welcome home.”

In the reception office of the detective agency.

Kujou, who was sitting on that chair, started to organize his sentences gently.

“Criminal psychology can be divided into two mainstreams. The first one is the thinking that ‘The criminals are born with the specificities, and their extreme behaviors result in criminal behaviors.’ And the second one is the thinking that ‘Since the criminals are surrounded by an abnormal environment, they are more familiar with criminal actions.’”

Correcting his posture by changing the way he placed his legs, Kujou lowered his voice.

“In order to solve the puzzles created by humans, both sides should be considered together. If you only focus on either one, the puzzles will seem to be entwined. Just like humans have personalities, cases also have personalities. And those personalities are associated with the darkness inside the criminals’ hearts. Same as motivations. All cases have some kinds of motivations. There are motivations spurred from hatred and wrath at a specific person and there are also motivations that can consider everyone as a target. And the specific motivations depend on people and society.”

Kujou slowly closed his eyes.

“The three stories you have seen are caused by the darkness inside the hearts of humans. Good and evil are defined by humans. However... Among the characters from these stories, who are good and who are evil?”

The time of the room ceased.

Enjoying the silence, Kujou opened his eyes and stood up.

“All the puzzles composed of superficial cases can be solved. However, the

puzzles of the hearts of humans... probably cannot be solved even with a whole lifetime.”

Saying that, an arched smile appeared at the corners of Kujou’s mouth.

“Then everyone. I am looking forward to meeting you somewhere in the future.”